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UNCLE SCIPIO

Mrs. J. H. Walworth

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UNCLE SCIPIO.

UNCLE SCIPIO

A STORY OF UNCERTAIN DAYS IN THE SOUTH

BY

MRS. JEANNETTE H. WALWORTH

AUTHOR OF

"DEAD MEN'S SHOES," "BAR SINISTER," "THAT GIRL FROM TEXAS," "SERAPH," ETC., ETC.

NEW YORK

R. F. FENNO & COMPANY

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Uncle Scipio.

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UNCLE SCIPIO.

CHAPTER I.

SCIPIO AT HOME.

A FEW words by way of preface will be necessary to a clear understanding of how I came to evoke Scipio's reminiscences of plantation days before the war, and of the trials and deprivations endured by noncombatants during that period, after which I will efface myself as far as practicable and leave this recital as nearly as possible as Scipio told it. To do otherwise would be to mar what gave me so much entertainment of a unique sort that I have thought it worthy of transcription.

When a Boston land syndicate, which had virtually purchased, in a bunch, nine or ten cotton plantations in one of the richest sections of the Mississippi Valley, proposed to engage me as their attorney and send me South to examine into the validity of the titles to their new acquisitions, as well as to have a general legal supervision of their interests, I asked for a few days in which to consider the matter. The pros and cons

seemed so very evenly balanced that I could not decide on the spot. I was needy, and the remuneration was liberal; I was study-worn, and the trip would be a recreation in itself; I had always been curious about that far-off portion of our common country, and here was an opportunity to gratify my curiosity at somebody else's expense. On the other hand, I might be losing my grip of a possibly magnificent clientage; I should be going among a people whose ways and manners of living were absolutely unlike anything in my own experience. To crown the "cons," I had to combat the violent prejudices of a large circle of anxious female relatives who knew even less than I did of that "dark land, the South," as we had heard it called from a city pulpit, whose active imaginations conjured up no end of horrors, among which rattlesnakes and Kuklux figured conspicuously. Curiosity and cupidity carried the day and I went.

Headquarters had been assigned me in the largest residence belonging to the syndicate purchase, for two reasons. It was the one nearest to the little post-town, by means of which alone I could communicate with my employers, and the family of the former owners had vacated it some time previous to my coming, so it would not be so much like an ejectment. I must confess the first glimpse of my new home was an immense surprise. I had, in common with a majority of my Northern neighbors, I imagine, formed my own conception of a plantation home, with not one particular of which this placé accorded.

I came to know afterwards that the "Old Holcombe Place," as it was locally designated, had once been the show place of the State. It was certainly a grand old

relic when I came to make my temporary home there. Through an immense green gate that had once been highly ornamental, but partook now of the decadence that had overtaken the whole estate, we first entered the grounds, and by a winding uphill road approached the mansion-house, perched high upon its crumbling terraces, on which were the neglected remains of beautiful shrubs and bushes. The japonicas had grown into ragged trees and shed their precious blossoms wastefully. The house itself, a two-storied structure in the main portion, with wings inclosing a pretty little courtyard, afforded absurdly spacious accommodations for a poor limb of the law, who, heretofore, had held sway over one small bedroom under the maternal roof, and desk-room only in a down-town law office; but I did my best to disseminate my personality all over the grand old house, spreading myself out very thin, so to speak. I selected a bedroom in the upper story—the one which gave me the best view of the flowery tangle on the neglected terraces and the yard premises below them, where nothing but the ornamental shade trees, which I afterwards learned were magnolias, myrtles, mimosas, and hollies, had been granted space. Outside the yard premises a park-like growth of oaks, beeches, and walnuts shut out the public road, only permitting a glimpse of the ancient green gate at the foot of the hill. I put my writing material in the library immediately under my sleeping apartment, with an imposing sense of elbow room. Then I appropriated one end of the long dining-room which dismally suggested a banquet hall deserted, for my fishing-rods and shooting apparatus, all of which done, still left me rattling around like one pea in a pod of

unusual dimensions. My powers of expansion were altogether unequal to the demand made upon them by that rambling old house.

The out-going dynasty had preferred letting the furniture of the house go with it to undertaking its removal over rough country roads to their place of exile. Only the books from the high glazed cases in the library, and certain family relics, had been removed. This added a touch of pathos to my surroundings, and inclined me toward unprofitable speculation touching the vanished forms and voices that had once filled my too spacious domicile.

I was not entirely alone, for, pending the closing of negotiations, the syndicate was getting things into shape for a mammoth crop, and its general business manager occupied another one of the many vacant bedrooms in the upper story and sat opposite me at the long table in the dining-room. He was not the man I would have chosen for mine own familiar, but of evenings, when the sun would drop suddenly out of sight behind the dense-leaved oaks, and the shades of night would fall gloomily under the funereal cedars in the front yard, I was not sorry to have the gleam of another fellow's cigar to keep mine company through the hours when no man could work, or read either, by reason of the myriad insects which, in that semi-tropical region, revel in the lamplight, and offer themselves up in a nightly and useless holocaust.

It was through the business manager that I first heard of old Scipio, the raconteur in whose hands presently I will leave this recital. I was questioning him about the shooting on the syndicate's lands, and declaring my intention of "putting in" every spare

moment in the woods. He had the advantage of me by several months' residence, and his business as general manager must necessarily have familiarized him already with the topography of the country. He was nothing of a hunter himself, he answered, but he believed he knew of a man on the place who could give me all the information I could possibly make use of. It was "Old Scipio." Perhaps he had another name. No one knew of it, though. He was the oldest darky on the place; had lived there all his life; had belonged to the people who had just sold out; before the war, when there had been a carriage to drive, he had been their carriage driver; wasn't much account now; shouldn't wonder if he (the manager) should weed him out when he came to make the contract with the hands. Old Scipio claimed to know every foot of country for forty miles round. Was quite ready to answer questions; in point of fact, nothing pleased him better than an opportunity to talk about old plantation days and his w'te folks. He (the manager) had been compelled to "cut him short" on several occasions. He lived down there in a cabin by "Crooked Creek," he and his wife. I would know the place by a big black walnut tree, with a "feed trough" nailed to its trunk, and an "everlasting" litter of oak splints under its branches. Old Scipio made a mighty show of industry, and was trying to convince himself and everybody else that the place couldn't possibly be run without his oak picking baskets, or his charge of the engine at ginning time. But he (the manager) did not propose to run a poorhouse with the syndicate's money, and he thought it more than likely that when

the cabins began to fill up old Scipio would have to "vamose."

None of this interested me, aside from the information that down by Crooked Creek, under the spreading arms of a black-walnut tree, I should find a man who professed to know every foot of the country for forty miles around. Such a native ought to prove invaluable to me. I would look him up the first time I went out with my gun.

I had no difficulty in finding Scipio's cabin, and when I came in view of it, a small log house, only one room and a shed inclosure, nestling close under the protecting branches of the black-walnut tree and surrounded by boundless breathing-space, involuntary comparisons between this old freedman's home and the crowded-to-suffocation of the city laborers' homes I had left behind me, forced themselves upon my consideration. The cabin had been whitewashed, not very recently, but sufficiently so to make a creamy background for the luxuriant purple bean-vine that clambered all over its front, sending aspiring tendrils to the very apex of the mud-and-lath chimney, which seemed perpetually trying experiments with the centre of gravity. The space in front of the cabin was guiltless of grass. The leaves of the big walnut cast dancing shadows on its clean-swept, hard-beaten surface, and on a lot of brilliant-plumaged Muscovy ducks, fresh from their morning's bath in the waters of the creek. The ducks quacked restlessly at my approach. A sleepy-looking hound crept from beneath the shelter of the front steps, to howl a feeble protest against my intrusion. My gun evidently discouraged him from any more valorous display of disapproval. The sound

of someone singing to the rhythm of a washboard ceased suddenly at the hound's note of warning, and in the doorway, framed about by the purple beans, a woman appeared. The hound crept from under the doorstep and, slinking to her side, uttered a more spirited note of defiance under protection of her skirts.

"Shet up, Mingo. Ain' you got no better sense den t' bark at w'te folks?" I heard her say as I stepped across the two rails of the bars that were down, and then she dropped me such a stately old-time courtesy that I was impelled to lift my hat in return.

"I am looking for old man Scipio," I said. "Can you tell me where to find him?"

I thought a look of anxiety flitted over the good-natured face behind the flowering beans. I knew I was not mistaken when she asked in a low, pleasant voice, that yet had such a plaintive ring to it:

"Is you the shurff, young Mars?"

It took me no little while to get used to the elisions and the violent distortions of the vernacular which make up the dialect of the Southern negro, and it was only after making an etymological study of it that I considered myself fitted to act as old Scipio's scribe. On that occasion I had to ask "What was a shurff?"

"De Shurff uv de County, I means. De man w'at goes 'roun' straight'nin' folks up. We done yhere de folks say, me en my ol' man, dat de new boss mos' lakly gwine to turn we out befo' de crap's pitched, en I 'lowed mebbe you wus de Shurff, come t' sarve notus on we. 'T would mighty nigh break de ol' man up t' hafter quit de ol' place, young marster."

I wished I could have assured her that no such

calamity hung over the little cabin under the walnut tree, but I could only reassure her for the time being by telling her that I was not the Sheriff, and that I wanted to see her husband for purely selfish motives.

"He's out in de woods, just t'udder side er de creek," she said, with a visible lifting of the clouds from her dusky face; "but I'll have 'm yhere in less 'n no time." She reached one shining arm high over her turbaned head, and took down a cow's horn that was hidden somewhere among the rafters of the shed roof. "He's mos' done clean out'n splits, she said, nodding her head explanatorily towards the pile of cotton baskets under the walnut, as she wiped the cobwebs from the mouth of the horn on her apron. Then she blew a blast—a blast that inflated her cheeks into two shining ebony hemispheres, and caused the unhappy hound at her feet to lift up its voice in an excruciating protest, and set all the ducks to quacking and all the geese to hissing. The amount of noisy energy awakened by that blast really seemed far in excess of my demands.

"Mebbe de fus' one won' fetch 'm," the trumpeter took the horn from her mouth to say encouragingly, "for Scipio 'lows dat I blows de horn sometimes jes' 'cause hit's handy, but I don' do no sech uv a thing."

A second blast, more prolonged than the first, brought a response from the other side of the creek, where I could see an old man bending beneath a load of long swaying oak splints, which he carried on his shoulders. He flung them upon a huge pile of their fellows in a small flat-bottomed boat, lying moored to the weedy banks of the creek, and straightened himself up to call through his hands:

"W'at you mekin' all dat rackit fur, Anarky?"

"W'ite folks waitin' fur yous," Anarky sent back in similar style, which had the effect of making the old basket-maker hastily unwrap the chain of his "flat" from the stump he was standing by, and flinging it into the boat, he soon poled across to where I was standing.

By the time he had landed and come clambering up the bank, evidently in a state of nervous anxiety at having kept "w'ite folks" waiting, I found myself in an unusually apologetic frame of mind.

"I never meant to give all this trouble, old man," I said, as he stood before me, holding his ragged straw hat in one hand while he mopped his furrowed forehead with the old bandanna he had taken from its crown, "but I expected to find you sitting under the walnut tree at work."

"I mos' genully is thar, boss," he said, glancing apologetically at the depleted pile of splints under the tree, "but I'se bleege t' go arter some mo' stuff dis mawnin'. I don' fool 'way much time, does I, Anarky?" He turned pleading eyes on his wife, who still stood in the doorway, palpably curious about my errand.

"Lan' er Moses, no," Anarky answered vigorously.

"Is you de ne new boss, young marster?" old Scipio asked, after courteously regretting that the backless chair under the walnut tree was the best seat he could offer me.

I could see the anxiety that had temporarily obscured the beaming good nature of Anarky's face repeating itself in his. It was plain that "the new boss," who had it in his power to send these two old people

adrift in an unexplored world, was the sword of Damocles to them.

I made haste to tell him exactly what I had come for, and to engage him as a guide through the bewildering woods that formed no inconsiderable portion of the syndicate's purchase.

A strange light came into the old man's dull eyes as he towered above me, where I sat on the backless chair under the walnut tree. I came afterwards to know it as the light of reminiscent happiness, for it illumined old Scipio's wrinkled face only when anything carried him backward on the stream of time to the carefree days when his fortunes had been inextricably bound up with those of his "w'ite folks" up at the "big house," whose bigness I found so oppressive. "It'll be lak ol' times," he said, rubbing his horny hands gleefully together, "t' go trompin' through dese woods wid you a-huntin'. It'll min' me uv de times w'en nuthin' would satisfy ol' Miss but Scip mus' let go all holts, don't keer w'at he drivin' at, en tromp wid Mars Spence through dese ve'y same woods. Not but w'at Mars Spence was plenty able t' look arter heself, son, jes ez able es you is. Our boys wuz allers a mannish set; but arter Mars Fraze met up wid dat bad axseedin' (shootin' uv hisseff in de leg, en nobody t' holp him home till we all done went lookin' fur him wid torches), ol' Miss, she never could 'bide t' see any one uv 'm shoulder a gun. En she never did, widout hoopin' up Scip t' foller clost on der heels. I wisht Van wuz 'live t'day, Anarky."

He turned a glance over his shoulders to where the sharer of all his cares and anxieties (really there seemed very little else to share), had been standing,

but Anarky had disappeared as soon as she was quite satisfied that my visit boded no evil to her ol' man, and had resumed the song of the washboard. so I had to ask who Van was.

"Don' know ol' Van?"

It was plain that Scipio considered my ignorance deplorable. It seemed incomprehensible to him that anyone could have lived as long as I must have lived in the same world with his w'ite folks, and be so poorly informed concerning them.

"Van was ol' marster's lemon setter which he bought in Orleens. Dat dog sho'ly wuz mo'n half human. He hed mo' sense in a minit den some folks is got in a lifetime. He was a beauty, too. Marster sot almost as much sto' by Van as he did by de kerridge horses. Dat's sayin' a good deal, fur dem hosses, the pa'r we hed w'en Van were bought, was spankers, I tell you. Ol' Miss, she wuz kinder skeered t' drive hin' 'em, but w'en Miss Bella and Miss Nannie wanted t' cut a splurge, nuthin' would do but Scip must put dem spankers to de brett. We kep' a brett, en a b'rooch, 'sides Marster's buggy en Mars' Spence's sulky, dem days. Mars' use t' call de brett de hoss-killer."

"The house up yonder was fuller then than it is now," I said, willing to humor the old man in what gave him such keen enjoyment and me so much information.

"I b'leeves you, son. Dey calls it de big house, but it warn' none too big dem days. It was mos' too little when the boys was all at home and Miss Bella and Miss Nannie got to havin' beaux. Seems lak dey oughtn't to let de ol' place go. Dey mout await tell Mars Fraze git back. Somefins wrong, son, dey hadn'

oughter t'be in sech a hurry. Who kin put der finger on de place whar Mars Fraze die? Who kin say dey know fo' sho' Mars Fraze daid 't all?"

Here was something beyond mere dalliance with the story of the past, which shed such a sunset glory over this old man's present. Here was something that might trench very closely on the immediate business in hand. Curiosity now presented itself in the guise of legitimate investigation.

"You must tell me all about your people sometime," I said, picking my gun up from the ground and rising from the backless chair. "Not to-day, for what with waiting for you and our long talk since, I've used up all my spare time. But some other time I want to hear about this 'Mr. Fraze.'"

"I wants to tell 'bout all my w'ite folks," he said, wistfully holding me with his dim eyes. "I wants to tell somebody all about Mars Fraze, somebody which is got a headpiece, and kin tell right from wrong, better'n ol' Scip kin. My w'ite folks was de fus' quality uv de lan'," he said, proudly drawing his bent form up to its fullest altitude, "en' der ain' many uv 'm left. But me an' Anarky didn' ever reckon to see de day w'en der wouldn't be a Holcum at de head uv dis plantation. Hit's time me an' Anarky wuz goin' too, son, but I'd lak t' tell you all 'bout Mars Fraze fus'. I kin do it w'en we's trompin' frew de woods togedder. I'd ruther do it in de woods den in de house. Walls is got years, dey tell me. It'll min' me uv ol' time t'go trompin' frew de woods wid you, son. Tho' ev'y thing min's me uv ol' times now. Seems lak I wuz countin' milestones all 'long de way fum de cabin do' t'de gates uv de golden city en yherin' voices a callin' t'me out'n

de buryin'-groun' up yonder under de locus' trees. W'en de cott'n's ready to be pick, en de co'n hangs ripe, it's marster's voice I hears. Wid de smell uv de apple-blossoms, en de hummin' uv de bees, Miss Bella and Miss Nannie, dey calls me t' lif'm high in my arms, so dey kin retch the purties' blossoms, en pesters me to tek de honey from de hives. En w'en de crows is cawin' over de tops ur de pickon trees, dat little sassy Spence comes back to me, a coaxin' en a pestrin for Unk Scip to frash de nut trees. Dey all comes back t' me 'cept Mars Fraze. Dat's w'at mek me say w'at I duz. Mars Fraze is on dis side de river, yit. He ain' pass over."

"Would the place belong to this Frazer Holcombe if he were alive?" I asked, thinking of syndicate interests.

"Of kose it would. Who else? I want t' tell you 'bout my w'ite folks," the old man said again, and I promised him he should.

I started back to the big house in a thoughtful frame of mind. I saw old Scipio seat himself where I had been sitting and promptly seize upon the fresh splints. He fell to work vigorously on his unfinished baskets, doubtless bent on making good the time he had "fooled away" talking with me. The hound, whose views concerning me had apparently undergone a radical change, followed me hospitably to the bars, sniffing amicably at my heels as I lifted them over. Anarky came to the door with a skillet of burning bacon in her hand, through whose fumes she cordially asked me "stop by w'en de termatserses got ripe en holp myseff." She had the very seed "ol' Miss give her a start with."

It was a peaceful domestic scene, containing all the charm of novelty to my Northern eyes, I marveled at the strength of the tie that still bound this aged couple to the "w'ite folks," from whom time and circumstances had freed them bodily, but towards whom their memories seemed to revert with reverential affection. I wondered if it betokened an ineradicable strain of servility in old Scipio and his wife Anarky. I wondered if perhaps it was simply a tribute to the gentle sway of exceptional owners. I wondered a great variety of things and wandered all over the broad field of speculative ethics opened up to me by this visit, with no grander result than finally to find my speculations narrowed down to a legal curiosity concerning this Frazer Holcombe whose existence was a matter of considerable moment to the syndicate I represented.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOLCOMBE CHAPEL.

I RECEIVED a much-needed lesson in punctuality the next morning, when, on drowsily unlocking the big front door, I found old Scipio sitting patiently on the steps, looking abnormally wide awake. He got up when I appeared with my gun and bags, and smiled benevolently in response to my apology.

'Hit's the yarly bird w'at ketches de worrums, son, en wil' turkeys is mouty skittish er de sunshine. Giv' me yo' traps t' tote."

He was old, and bending under the weight of his years. I was young, and sturdily indifferent to the years, but the force of habit impelled him to ease the white man's burden. I doubt whether he understood the motive of my refusal, and I am quite sure he did not credit me with any desire to save him. Scipio and I had to learn each other.

"What is the prospect for rain?" I asked, as we left behind us the crumbling terraces, strewn with the waxen petals of white and red japonicas, and passed through the ancient green gate into the dusty "big road," beyond where we could better see the grayish-blue stretches of sky overhead.

"No rain t'day, son. Spiders spinnin' der webs all crost de road." He pointed out the gossamer filaments that swayed from bush to bush along the roadside, starting from some huge central mesh, where la

night's dewdrops had become entangled, and now, glittering in the morning sunlight, made a jeweled disk out of a despised cobweb. "En de rain-crows jes' a beggin' fur rain, but der hollerin' won' fetch none t' day. De rain-crow is sometimes mistook in he's cakerlations, but I never knowed de spiders t' 'ceive folks yit." Which was a high testimonial to the moral worth of spiders. I came to know afterwards that Scipio had an infinite variety of weather signs, all of which were absolutely trustworthy in his own estimation.

"Is you seen de chapil, son?" my pathfinder stopped suddenly to ask, and I repeated the word curiously. A place of worship was the last thing I expected to find on the Holcombe place, and I could only think that old Scipio was making some unwarrantable use of the word. I had discovered at every turn, indications all pointing towards the former dynasty as a luxurious, pleasure-seeking lot, and am not ashamed, at this late day, to confess to a few socialistic comments on the inequalities of the velvet smoothness of their lives and the corduroy roughness of some other folks, my own for instance. I wanted a "why" for those inequalities, you see. There was the billiard-room, with its faded green table and its dust-covered cues. I had knocked the balls about over the moth-eaten baize in a desultory fashion, several times of evenings, since my domestication, consciously envying the fellows who had had time to acquire proficiency in the noble game. But the billiard-room was gloomy and close, and the noise made by my cue awoke preternaturally loud echoes. The room was hung with foils and boxing gloves, and my small bed-

room lamp cast such grotesque shadows on the encumbered walls that it was not hard to fancy all the ghosts of all the billiard-playing Holcombes crowding close up to my elbows, in the dim circle beyond the lamplight, and grinning at my clumsiness. And there was the ten-pin alley, down below the lowest terrace. Its worn planks and battered pins told the story of constant use, and there were stalls enough in the stables to have fitted out a moderate livery-stable. But a chapel! That was an entirely different thing. "No," I told old Scipio, I had "not seen the chapel."

"Den you ain' see nothin' 'tall," he said in positive voice, and turned short about where he stood. "I gwine tek you smack by it, ef it do tek us a little out'n de way. Ol' Miss, she build dat chap'l en she mouty proud uv it w'en it fus' finish, en de Bishop come 'long en do wat t' it, son? corns'crate you call it. Folks say you cyarn fin' its lak dis side er Orleens."

"These people seem to have had money to do pretty much as they pleased," I said, quite willing to help Scipio mount his hobby, he rode it with such keen enjoyment.

"Money? Who? De Holcums? I b'leeves you, sir. You see, ol' Miss, she were a Frazer. De Frazers dey ben in dis country sence fo' C'lumbus come. De Frazers wus rich es cream. Always wus es rich es cream. Ol' Miss she wur de las' uv de Frazers. Dat fambly die out mighty quick lak. Anarky she grew up wid ol' Miss, en she wuz 'bout ol' Miss, one way en tudder, tell de ol' lady go too. I come inter de fambly wid de Holcums. I wus Co'nul Holcum's man w'en he went sparkin' Miss Sallie Frazer, en fro

de day him en Miss Sallie git married, me an Anarky ben wid 'm. Co'nul Holcum, he were a dasher. He b'long t' de Holcums ov Virginny. Dey waz quality folks, too, de Holcums, but dey war'n rich lak de Frazers. Him en me used t' go to de W'ite Sulpher Springs ev'y summer. Dar he met Miss Sallie. En de fus' thing you know, dar wuz a fus'-class weddin' on foot."

"And Frazer Holcombe was the first child of this union?" I never could make old Scipio walk squarely by my side. If there was a path to find or a quagmire to be explored, he would crash ruthlessly ahead of me in his old 'stoga boots that were as wrinkled and bent with the weight of years as himself, but as long as we were in a plain open path, he rigidly maintained a certain space between us, sending his remarks and comments to me over one or the other of my shoulders. When I asked that question about Frazer Holcombe, he stepped quickly up and deposited his answer immediately in my ear:

"No, sir, Mars Fraze wor'n' de fus' child uv dat union, es you calls it. I gwine tell you all 'bout Mars Fraze some er dese days. But not dis mawnin'. You's got squeerils en' wil' turkey in yo' head dis mawnin', an' w'en I 'xplains 'bout Mars Fraze, yo' min' mus' be cl'ar to tek it all in. I gwine do Mars Fraze jestus ef de sky fall." Probably I would have undertaken to convince Scipio that my mind was not of such a limited calibre that I could not attend to the business in hand and grasp Frazer Holcombe's story at the same time, but, while I was pondering the wisdom of letting the old man give his recollections in his own way and time, without subjecting him to anything

like a legal cross-examination, the chapel loomed suddenly into view, extracting from me an exclamation of delighted surprise. Old Scipio's dull eyes glowed with gratified pride as he ejaculated, enthusiastically but somewhat inconsequently:

"Dar now, did'n't I be'n tol'n you so?"

The Holcombe estate lay on both sides of the public road. On a hot, sunny day, its miles of white plank fencing, framing in the dusty, red-clay road, were a sore trial to the eye of man. But Scipio, with me following docile at his heels, had long since deserted the dusty highway and plunged into a wagon-road in the woods on the other side of the way from the mansion house. Perhaps it had once been a good road, but now it was scarcely more than defined by the grass-grown furrows and the crushed undergrowth which yielded to the pressure of the heavy teams that used the "chapel road" only when firewood was wanted, or timber for building purposes must be hauled from the rich forests beyond.

Just off the road, sitting back in a spot that had been cleared of all but a few hollies and graceful elders, stood a quaint little Gothic structure of brick, that had once been painted in imitation of gray stone. Its tiny spire pointed to the gray skies overhead in faultless proportions. A magnificent Lamarque rose had been planted on one side of the front porch, and in spite of time and neglect still flourished vigorously, clothing the entire face of the structure with glossy verdure, and in blossom-time with a wealth of fragrant beauty.

About the low ornamental iron railing that inclosed the chapel a yellow jasmine vine of native woodland

growth had entwined itself with such lavish luxuriance that the little building was girdled about by a wall of shining green.

Through the gate that was never shut we entered the weed-choked yard. The dust that had gathered on the inside of the windows foiled my efforts to catch a glimpse of the interior from where I stood knee deep in the dewy rank growth, with a reckless disregard for probable influenzas and possible rattlesnakes that would have filled my distant female relatives with righteous wrath.

"We kin git inside, son, ef you wants to," said old Scipio, speaking almost in a whisper, "but dis sholy is a cu'ous way t'hunt wil' turkeys." The silence of the place had cast a sober spell over him. I did want to; so, stepping up on the portico, he reached high up and took a big key down from its nail. The planks of the portico resounded noisily to the tread of our feet. A crop of rusty nails that had sprung from the decaying wood stood prominently in view. The key turned smoothly enough in the lock, and as old Scipio opened the door an owl that had found its way into the little vestibule fluttered clumsily from its perch and swept out over our heads with a dismal hoot.

"You see, son," said old Scipio apologetically, "de w'ite folks don' come yhere much sence ol' Miss die. Ol' Miss she kep' de whole thing runnin', preachers en all. En I sometimes think it mus' hu't her feelin's up yon, whar thar ain' no rust nor no moths, t'see de little church she sot so much sto' by so neglectidsome. I reck'n I'll git Anarky t' come up yhere en dus' roun' some."

I was not paying much attention to him. I was

examining an unusally fine stained-glass window that ornamented the little chancel, and glancing about me in a perfect maze of astonishment. There was a baptismal font of the purest Carrara marble, and in niches on both sides the chancel wonderfully beautiful statues of Scriptural interest. As I stepped beyond the communion rail, the better to examine the stained glass, I brushed against the moth-eaten embroidered altar cloth. A cloud of dust flew out, and with it two bewildered bats that circled heavily about my head for a second before settling on the sculptured rim of the pure white baptismal font. Old Scipio brushed them off hastily with the brim of his ragged hat. He would not brook such desecration. "Mars bought it in Uerp," he said, dusting the rim of the font with his coat-sleeve, "en dem figgers, too," indicating the pallid occupants of the niches. "Ev'y Holcum chile, 'cept Mars Fraze, was baptize in dat bowl; en now mos' ev'y one on 'm lays sleepin' onderneath it." He pointed to a spot beneath the chancel, before which he stood with his uncovered head reverently bowed: "Marster went befo' de war. Miss Bella, she follow 'bout two years after. Den ol' Miss, she did'n' die tell arter it was all over. Mars Spence daid too, but we don' know whar he buried. He die endurin' de war. Miss Nannie en Mars Fraze is all dat's lef'."

He maintained a running monologue while I was exploring the chapel. A cabinet organ stood on one side the altar rail. I noticed that the dust lay less thick there than elsewhere, and that the stool in front of it was incumbered with loose sheets of music not at all dusty.

"This looks as if somebody used the chapel yet.

Scipio." Scipio had come to look on me as one having authority on the place. He glanced at me deprecatingly now, and smoothed the rim of his hat in a fashion I came to understand as a sign of anxiety with him:

"Somebody do, boss" (he only called me boss when he fancied it necessary to propitiate me), "but she don' do a speck a harm to nobody, en I meks bold to ax you not to lock de chapel ag'in' her. It's Miss Tildy, Maj. Ransom's daughter, that walks over yhere sometimes t' play all by herseff. Miss Tildy use t' play de organ en sing w'en dey held meetins yhere. En, sir, she, could outsing de mockin'-birds any day. Me en Anarky wuz talkin' 'bout Miss Tildy's singing 'Rock er Ages,' jus' las' night. Me en Anarky use to sit up yon in de gallery, wid de res' uv de folks from de quarters, although" (with strong emphasis on the "though") "we wor'n' never quarter niggers befo' de war. Well, sir, mebbe I ain' see dis chapel full! I see it so full in dem days, dat it couldn' a holt another chile. En de horses en de kerridges outside, thick ez hops. Der wor'n' no grass growin' out yon on de brick walk in dem days. I 'lows I'll fetch my hoe 'long next time en chop dat grass down."

"But how about the young lady who plays on the organ?" I said, the young man element in me demanding some sustenance and sniffing a possible girl to cultivate.

"Miss Tildy kin skeersly be call a young lady now, son, doa she's han'some as a picture yit. But she's hed mo'n her sheer uv worry. It's sorter made her eyes look heavy, an' turn her ha'r a different color; it used t' look like a chestnut wid de sun shinin' on it. But

she kin sing yit. I wuz passin' 'long de road, not so ve'y long ago. I wuz huntin' fur some oak fur my baskits, 'lowin' ef I could, I'd ruther git it dis side er de crick, an' I yhere de organ goin'. I know it wuz Miss Tildy, an' I jis' crope up an' sot down on de portico steps an' lis'n till I done forgit thar wuz sech a thing in de worl' as cott'n baskits a-waitin' fur to be finished down thar at my cabin. She wuz a singin' 'I would not live alway,' when I fus' crope up, en den she struck inter 'Come ye 'sconsolate,' en she sing lak she were 'sconsolate for true. Miss Tildy's hed her sheer er worry. Some folks 'lowed Miss Tildy would git over Mars Fraze's goin' 'way so sudden, en marry somebody else, but I wor'n' one on em, fur I ben watchin' 'em bofe eva sence dey tuk t' each udder soon as ever dey git back from school, en I knowed it wuz 'tell def did dem part.' Me en Anarky wuz talkin' 'bout Miss Tildy en Marse Fraze jus' arter you come away fum de cabin yistiday. Anarky, she say, she think you favor Mars Fraz some in de back."

"I hope Mr. Frazer Holcombe had a good-looking back then," I said, with a laugh that sounded decidedly out of place in the silent chapel, and Scipio hastened to assure me that the comparison was altogether complimentary to me.

We had consumed quite an hour in the chapel but it was still early morning when we stepped out again on the little portico where the rusty nails sprang aspiringly, and little heaps of dead leaves nestled in sheltered nooks. Scattering them idly with my foot, a heavy chain clanked against one of the wooden posts that supported the rose-wreathed portico. The links

were rusty, and the momentum given it by my foot lasted only long enough to reveal its existence.

"We used t' have a church bell too," said Scipio, conscientiously minded to sustain the chapel's good name; "but w'en de w'ite folks got t' fightin', en' dey wuz short uv cannons, ev'y plantashun bell in de country wuz shipped to Orleens, en ol' Miss sent de chapel bell 'long too. She say w'at fur she not send it? She done sont her boy (dat wuz Mars Spence), en nothin' else didn't count. Dat chain wuz hitched t' de bell in de steeple. Now, den, we got t' buckle down t' business," he said, as we finally found ourselves once more in the wagon road, where, taking the lead, he soon plunged into what seemed an impenetrable, trackless jungle to me, but which he, with unfaltering fidelity to his purpose and to his memory, threaded rapidly and fearlessly, until his judgment demanded a halt, which he called with the most startling suddenness. He had heard a faint, plaintive wood-note, that had entirely escaped my untrained ears. Putting his folded hands to his lips, with fingers scientifically interlocked, he answered it with an encouraging gobble of so delusive character, that, if he had not been standing in full view of me, I should have felt warranted in pulling trigger on the sound. Nothing but over-caution, born of repeated and bitter experience, could have kept the hens I so longed to slaughter from responding confidingly to that inhuman note of invitation.

If, in my "tromps" about the woods with old Scipio for a pathfinder, I failed to bring back the quantities of game I vaingloriously calculated on beforehand, it was not because the game was scarce, nor because

Scipio's woodcraft was at fault, but because gradually I found myself growing more and more interested in the old man's annals of a lonely neighborhood, and so failed to make a proper use of my opportunities. Scipio had standing instructions to get me back to the big house by ten o'clock, come what might. I was afraid of the midday sun in that climate, and my hunting was merely incidental to syndicate occupations. We came back by way of the chapel, on that morning, and this time it was my civilized ears that first caught the plaintive tones of the organ. A large black Newfoundland dog was lying on the portico just across the open doorway. He raised his huge head and fastened his intelligent eyes calmly on our advancing forms. I was glad he did not belong to the yelping breed, otherwise the soft, sweet strains of the organ, touched by a skilful hand, would have been broken for me. He regarded us silently, until satisfied that we had no intention of turning aside to molest the lonely musician in the chapel, then dropped his head contentedly on his outstretched paws with a ponderous sigh of relief.

"This is the Ransom's dog, I suppose," I said to Scipio, as we left the chapel in our rear and the music came to us only in disjointed fragments.

"Yes, Miss 'Tildy's dog. Mars Fraze giv' her de mother uv dis one w'en it wur a little pup. Miss 'Tildy never cum frew de woods to de chapel widout old King Cole, dat w'at she call 'm, come long too."

"Where do the Ransoms live?"

He stopped and pointed: "Just 'bout dat direction. You kin see de house w'en de trees is bar'. Tain' de big house. Dat done burn down. But Miss 'Tildy done

mek things look es scrimpshus en nice 'bout de little house dey lives in now es kin be. I tell you Miss 'Tildy is a stirrer."

I asked the business manager that night if the Ransom plantation was included in the syndicate purchase, and was informed that it was not. "Old Ransom is an obstinate old cove. It's hard to tell why he didn't sell out. All his neighbors tried to get him to. But I believe he'd rather starve to death over there on the place, where he's been master for nearly a lifetime, than pocket the price of his place and live somewhere else in comfort. They say his daughter is about as obstinate as he is on the score of leaving the old place. They are a queer couple—not like anybody I ever come up with before."

I thought that might be highly possible, and yet not wholly condemnatory of the Ransoms, as the business manager had belonged to the overseer class before the war, and was a much better judge of mules and cotton crops than of the higher grades of humanity.

I was never accused of any sentimental leanings; in fact, rather prided myself on the possession of a purely practical temperament, but I found my mind wandering speculatively towards this conservative old ex-rebel and his daughter, whose "hair used to look like a chestnut with the sun shining on it." There was something very pathetic in their preference of poverty in the old home to comfort in exile. I should very much like to see these Ransoms.

It was when I wrote a description of the chapel in the woods and the fragment of Miss Ransom's story that I had gleaned on that occasion, to my youngest

sister, the romantic member of our very prosaic family, that I got in return an enthusiastic request that I would make my letters as much as possible descriptive of my new life amid such novel surroundings

CHAPTER III.

THE RANSOM FAMILY.

NO ONE, unless possibly someone who, like me, has spent all his days within the stony limits of a city, can conceive of the subtle charm that early morning possesses in the mild climate and amid the favoring conditions that surrounded me at the Holcombe place. It was different from anything I had ever experienced, or even imagined, of country life. There was none of that brisk, pleasant stir that belongs to the waking hours of a farm, where to every moment is apportioned its own (too full) share of labor. It was more like the lifting of a veil from some enchanted palace as it lay waiting for the awakening of its sleeping princess. Perhaps it had been different in the olden time Scipio was so fond of telling about, but in my day morning meant simply a quiet merging of darkened stillness into sunlit stillness, with various pleasant accompaniments all of the placid sort. One of the pleasantest of these accompaniments was the ecstatic singing of the mocking-birds from the japonica bushes on the terraces. No one molests the mocking-birds there. Neither the fear of death nor imprisonment for life mars their perfect days, in reward for which immunity they flood the air with rich and tender melody. I found their song a much pleasanter reveille than the rattling of the milkman's tin cans for which I had always waited at home.

None of the noises inseparable from plantation life reached the mansion house perched high on its flowery terraces. One might stand among the shrubbery, and look far off to where the young cotton growth was hiding the rich brown furrows, and perhaps hear the whistle of the ploughman mellowed by distance, or, nearer at hand, he might catch the gentle lowing of the cows, coming in a straggling procession towards the pen, down yonder below the terraces; trellises covered with graceful hop-vines hide the pen itself from the house. But no sound more harsh than the leisurely turning of a coffee-mill in the kitchen set far back in the big yard is likely to disturb the sense of absolute peace inspired by the perfumed stillness of those early morning hours when the humming-birds are breakfasting on honeysuckle wine and yellow butterflies flit through the air in noiseless revelry.

To one who had memories of the old house full of life and motion this stillness would have been tinged with sadness. I did not wonder that the only remaining member of the Holcombe family positively refused to make her home there, beautiful as it all was. This only remaining member (unless, indeed, Scipio's "Mars Fraze" should turn up, was the "Miss Nannie" of his stories, and it was with her husband that the syndicate was negotiating.

Scipio had been so disgusted with my empty game-bag after our first expedition, that he seemed to consider his own reputation at stake, and nothing would satisfy him but an appointment for the next day. It was my determination not to be outdone in energy by a man more than twice my age that got me up early enough to discover the charms of dawn at "Mont-

rose," as the Holcombe place was called. After that I often got up preternaturally early just for the novelty of the scene.

"I gwine tek you down by Bristow's lane," Scipio said to me on that occasion, after commending my energy. "You fool 'way too much time at de chap'l yistiday. Yonder paf, down by de stables, leads t' Bristow's lane." I had seen the stables only from my bedroom window. The expanse of their moss-grown shingle roofs had conveyed a tolerable idea of their magnitude, an idea which was more than sustained by the cavernous interior with its innumerable stalls, in one of which the business manager's horse, a meek-spirited hack upon which he made his daily rounds, was taking his solitary breakfast. He raised his head to look at us dejectedly over the ragged edge of his stall, suspecting us, perhaps, of coming to curtail his limited recess.

"Dat hoss sho'ly do look lonesome," Scipio said, stopping because I had stopped. "Dis stable don' look lak ol' times."

"Did the Holcombes keep a livery stable?" I asked maliciously.

Scipio's quick "Sah!" was more a snort of indignation than a note of inquiry.

"I don't see what they wanted with such stables if they did not," I said, and perhaps I said it a trifle resentfully. I shall have several humiliating admissions to make in the course of my service as Scipio's scribe, and I may as well make the first one here; I envied the sybaritish past of those fellows. Especially did I envy them the ability to indulge so largely in my own particular fancy. From my earliest boyhood I had

been "a little off," the girls at home called it, on the subject of horses. I had never cared to reach any higher pitch of financial success than would warrant me in keeping my own pair. The horses I have bought and ridden in imagination would have mounted Xerxes' army. The sight of those stalls in the Holcombe stable had an unaccountably irritating effect on me. These fellows had possessed, without any exertion on their own part, that which all my best directed efforts had, so far, failed to secure me. My fit of retrospective envy lasted only while Scipio was wordily filling the stalls with the ghosts of their former occupants, even to Miss Nannie's and Miss Bella's ponies, but I am not sure there was not a snarl in my voice, as I asked:

"Did those fellows ever do any sort of work at all, Scipio?"

"W'ich fellers, boss?" the old man asked, looking at me with a puzzled expression of countenance.

"The Holcombe men— the old 'Colonel,' as you call him, and the Holcombe boys."

Scipio's face underwent some peculiar contortions at this juncture. His small, twinkling black eyes disappeared totally behind a pucker of wrinkles which extended to the tip of his nose. His chin was elevated skyward, while his square shoulders moved up and down convulsively. It was Scipio's way of expressing intense amusement. He recovered from this fit of inaudible laughter presently, sufficiently to say humbly, "Scuse me, boss"; then he took off his hat by way of deprecating my possible disapproval of this sudden loss of "manners" on his part. He looked at me gravely as he asked:

"Son, ef yo' ma en yo' pa hed ben borned wid a silver spoon in der moufs, en w'en you come 'long dey stick a silver spoon in yo' mouf, w'at trade you reck'n you'd a-hankered arter keenest?"

It was the first, but not the last time I had occasion to detect a vein of mild sarcasm in Scipio's remarks, and I had to confess, with a laugh, that, given the Holcombe boys' surroundings, in all probability I should have led their lives.

"Not dat our boys was triflin'," Scipio hastened to add; "no, siree. I see de day many a time w'en I 'lowed dat Mars Spence en Mars Fraze wuz workin' harder den if dey had a cord er wood t' cut en cord up befo' sundown. Looks lak w'ite folks kin play hard es some niggers kin work. Mars Spence en Mars Fraze was mighty ambitious lak. Dey war'n' gwine be outdone by nobody at nothin'. Me en Anarky wuz talkin' jes' de night fo' las' 'bout de ve'y las' fox hunt our folks hed befo' de racket commence w'ich broke we all up. En Anarky, she say, w'en dey all went prancin' by de terrace whar ol' Miss allers took her stan' t' wave 'm good luck at de start, she don' want t' see no purtier sight. Mars Spence, he wuz mos' genully in de lead, dough der waz some fus'-class hosses en some fus'-class riders allers on hand. W'en dark comes down yon t' Crooked Creek, en me and Anarky ain' got nuthin' t' do but set in de cabin do' en wait fur bedtime, it sorter comforts us, you see, son, t' talk over ol' times. It's mos' lak goin' over it all 'gain."

I never allowed Scipio to suspect that he was acting as local historian. It would have marred the spontaneity of his recitals, and perhaps been provocative of "make-ups." As it was, his description of a Missis-

sippi fox hunt, given that morning as we walked slowly down Bristow's lane, between two ragged rows of overgrown, untrimmed osage-orange trees, was more like an audible reverie than anything else I can liken it to.

"Mon'rose is allers be'n a prime place fur huntin' mos' everything. You see, we's got a heap er woodlan', reg'lar forisses all over de place, en thar's no een' t' de varmints en t' de wil' critters them woods er ourn shelters. 'Mongst 'em were dem misuble little pesky red foxes w'at 'ud comin' lopin' crost de fiel's er nights en nab er lamb, er a pullet, er ev'n ol' Miss's bronze turkeys she sot so much sto' by, ef you gin 'm half a chance. It was prime fun fur de young folks er huntin' uv dem foxes. En w'en Mars Billy Ransom, dat were Miss 'Tildy's onlies' brudder (ol' Mr. Ransom ain't had but two chillun), he come 'long wid his houn's, en Miss 'Tildy on her little w'ite mar', wid a blue ridin' skyirt an' cap, an' de Parker boys, an' de Millers, three on 'em, 'cludin' Jeff, which brought 'long der extry horses, en our boys, wid our hounds a mekin music, I tell you, sir, de ol' meetin' ground down thar', just inside our big gate, look gay fur true. Den w'en dey prance out, two en two, Mars Fraze en Miss 'Tildy allers manage to git side by side. Scipio boun' to be on han', too. Ol' Miss 'low she warn'n' gwine trus' Miss Nannie en Miss Bella on no sech expedition less'n Scip were 'long. En w'en things git hot, en de young blood wuz up, en de boys went scatterin' arter de fox over ditches, en over de bars, under whip en spur, den Miss Nannie and Miss Bella mos' genully 'clude dey'd hed 'nough, en me en them would stop under de trees t' wait for de outcome.

"But Miss 'Tildy, nuthin' didn' stop her; she jus'

keep straight 'long es long es der was anythin' goin'. She 'low she ain' never gwine do nuthin' by halves. Miss Nannie en Miss Bella, dey was sorter timid lak. But Miss 'Tildy Ransom she ain' skeered er nuthin'. Dar she, right now!"

There was a sudden change in Scipio's voice, and his account of the fox hunt terminated almost as abruptly as Bristow's lane did. The ragged osage-orange hedging straggled its way to meet a dilapidated fence that turned from it at right angles. In front of us, on both sides of the path we must still pursue, was a grove of trees, underneath which were lying a lot of lean cattle not yet aroused to the pitch of energy which would carry them to the distant grazing grounds. On one side of the road, barely shielded from observation by a couple of tall althea bushes that grew on either side of the low front steps, was a small frame house, apparently of only two rooms. In the small grassless yard at the side by the house, a lot of chicken coops were standing, and a number of fussy, noisy fowls were fluttering and cackling about the feet of a young woman, who was stirring something in a big wooden tray with a big iron spoon. Her back was towards us, and I only caught the idea of a tall, stately form, with a slender neck and a graceful coil of hair, before we had passed on out of sight. "Dat's Miss 'Tildy herseff," said Scipio, lowering his voice, very unnecessarily, in view of the amount of noise Miss Ransom's poultry was making about her ears. "Folks sez Miss 'Tildy keeps de house up by sellin' her poultry en her butter en truck. It sho'ly would hu't Mars Fraze's feelin's ef he knowed it. Dat ain' de house he usen t' go co't'n' Miss 'Tildy in. No, sir, dat were a cabin oncet,

en Mr. Ransom's stockminder live in it. Dey tuk it w'en de big house burn down, 'cause it were furdes' 'way from de quarters. But Miss 'Tildy mek it look 'nough better 'n it usen to. I sho'ly is sorry fur dat chile, she's had mo' 'n her share of worry."

I was sorry for her, too. I could not help comparing the plainly clad, motionless figure, in the little grassless yard we had just left behind, with the dashing Miss 'Tildy of the fox hunt, that Scipio had been describing when we came in sight of her home. It was rather tantalizing to have only floating scraps of melody or furtive fleeting glances to connect me with the only young woman in the neighborhood, and I resolved to find some means of presenting myself formally to Miss Ransom. I would make some excuse for calling on the old gentleman. I was conceited enough then to suppose that my undoubted respectability would impress them at first sight. I felt a very young man's enthusiastic desire to show my appreciation of the change in Miss Ransom's circumstances and of her heroic acceptance of a hard lot.

I redeemed myself in Scipio's estimation that morning, and in my own, too, by shooting an unusually fine wild turkey cock and bagging several brace of reedbirds. We had wandered so circuitously about the woods that it was little short of marvellous to me to have him bring me out of them, in the field just opposite the grove we had passed through on our way thither. We were inside the field, and must climb the fence to reënter Bristow's lane. The cattle had all betaken themselves to the pasture during our absence and the sun was shining full down upon the gallery of the house behind the altheas. In front of the little

picket fence a horse and buggy were standing. It was a very antiquated turnout. The top of the buggy was up, but its wrinkled surface curled back in a dog-eared fashion, permitting us a view of a basket of eggs and a bright tin bucket over whose top a white napkin had been tied. New shafts, of some white unpainted wood, gleamed along the bony sides of the old gray horse that was attached to the buggy by harness whose untrustworthiness was painfully apparent. Standing near the horse's head, busily tying some portion of the headgear together with twine strings, was an old man who, I decided without aid from Scipio, was Miss Ransom's father. There was the same rather arrogant poise of the head in both. Scipio was for climbing over the fence and proceeding immediately on our way up the lane, but some instinct, a foolish one, perhaps, made me hesitate to let the old gentleman, tinkering away there so industriously at his worn harness, know that he had been the object of notice to strange eyes.

"Can't we make it inside the field?" I asked Scipio, almost in a whisper. To which he answered that the ditch widened into a pond just beyond, and we must cross the fence right there. "Then we'll wait till he drives off," I said. But this was not immediately. The headstall adjusted to suit him, something in the traces attracted his anxious scrutiny. He turned his eyes towards the house and called for some twine in a voice of rather petulant impatience. Miss Ransom herself brought it. It was evident that she was used to humoring an irascible man. She came hastily and with head uncovered, for which, personally, I was *thankful,* as it gave me an admirable view of a face

concerning which I was consciously growing quite curious. She stood by the old man and held the clumsy leather trace in her smooth white hands while he wound the strong twine around the weak places. Yes, she must have been strikingly pretty in her very young days. I thought her beautiful then, notwithstanding the pathetic curves in the corners of her mouth and a certain hopeless calmness in the gaze that was then wandering all over the faithless harness.

"If I thought the buggy would stand it," I heard her say in a slow, anxious voice, "I would ask you to take in a sack of sweet potatoes, too, father. They are bringing a good price now."

"The confounded thing won't stand another half-pound," the old gentleman said, climbing laboriously up into the buggy. Gathering the listing reins into his gloved hands, he applied the whip to the ridgy spine of the horse between the new shafts, and was off.

She stood there for a little while looking after him. The sun shone down on her uncovered head, making its brown waves glisten. Her hands were clasped about the ball of twine. They were small and shapely. In spite of the extreme plainness of her black dress, she conveyed the impression of elegance. It was as if the old leisurely life of refined enjoyment had left an ineradicable stamp. As soon as she turned and went indoors Scipio and I climbed the rail fence and walked briskly up Bristow's lane toward Montrose.

It was altogether absurd, but, as I passed under the high springing arch of the large front door into the hall, whose oilclothed surface gave such a resonant sound to the lightest footfall, I felt almost as if I were

defrauding that girl, down there at the foot of Bristow's lane, out of something that was rightfully hers. How well that stately presence of hers would become the loftly ceilings and the spacious apartments of the mansion house at Montrose!

I don't know whether it was due to indiscreet indulgence in that wild turkey which appeared on the dinner table that afternoon, or because of much dwelling on the pathetic glimpse I had had that morning of the Ransoms and their fight with fate, but that night I had a dream, all about Frazer Holcombe and Matilda Ransom, which was so excessively vivid that the next morning, in writing to my employers, I strongly recommended that the purchase of Montrose should be held in abeyance until I could give the matter of its title a more searching investigation than seemed necessary in the case of any other one of the plantations included in the syndicate purchase.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRADER'S DAUGHTER.

THE longer I occupied the Holcombe house and the more familiar I grew with the sensation of having an entire world suddenly placed at my disposal, the less I marvelled at a certain masterfulness ("arrogance" I have heard it called) which marked the manners of those men who were monarchs of all they surveyed at a time when that survey included a lot of obsequious slaves. This absence of all struggle for supremacy, this acquiescence in the infallibility of his judgment, was fitted to engender in a man a damaging sense of superiority. There was nothing to measure one's self by.

Perhaps, if everybody could have been master, nobody would have dreaded slavery. I'm afraid I found Scipio demoralizing, if not enervating, with his eager servitude. He convinced me of the excessive ease with which "use doth breed habit in a man." It came to be a regular thing for him to spend an hour or two in my room every evening, ostensibly to brush my clothes and blacken my shoes, in reality for our mutual entertainment. There was a tacit understanding between us that the business manager was not to know. The world, as I saw it down there, seemed so absurdly disproportioned to the number of its inhabitants, that it seemed scarcely worth while to "weed" old Scipio out. On the contrary, I found myself perpetually forming large colonization plans, and was sur-

charged with suggestions that I could and would have made to the syndicate if I had been the business manager instead of a powerless little attorney, nosing among musty title-deeds. I should especially have liked to see the stretch of rich land that lay along both sides of the white fence cut up into small building lots and flower gardens, and bristling with neat cottages, adapted to laborers' families, whom I would import out of the overcrowded cities to people these fair lands. I ventilated some of these views one morning as Scip and I were tramping along the dusty road outside the gleaming white fence.

"Is you talkin' 'bout po' w'ite trash, son?" he asked, looking dubiously into my face.

"White people—certainly."

"Den whar yo' cott'n crap come in at? You better lef' well 'nough 'lone, son. I see dat speerimint tried on dis ve'y place mo'n oncet sence freedom. Mister w'ite man, he come 'long en hire some lan' frum de man'ger fur so many poun's er lint t' de acre. Mister wi'te man, he start in mighty brickitty. He gwine play ballyhoo wid he's cott'n crap 'en he's co'n, en punkins, en peas. He gwine show mister nigger w'at was w'at. Nigger got t' stan' aside w'en mister w'ite man mek up he min' to work." (Here Scipio was seized with one of his convulsions of silent laughter. It dislodged his shabby old hat, and necessitated a halt, while he picked it up and slapped it vigorously against his knee to free it from dust.) "But w'en de sun git hot, en de grass growin' so fas' you kin hear it; yes, sir, I sez hear it; den whar mister w'ite man! Kyurl up in de shade watchin' mister nigger git'm out'n de grass. Dar' whar' he be."

Perhaps I would have tried to convince Scipio that I was not such a poor political economist as his scornful illustration would make me, if just then something vastly more interesting than philanthropic schemes of colonization had not whirled into sight, creating an agreeable diversion.

Out of some thick clouds of dust that had been rolling towards us for some little while, which I had been accrediting to nothing less clumsy than an ox team, there suddenly emerged a village cart of the nobbiest pattern. It glistened with fresh varnish from the hubs of its yellow wheels, that spun around like huge rotating sunflowers, to the tips of the shafts, between which was the best-groomed beast I had seen since coming South. The driver was a young woman, perhaps not under twenty-two or three, and handsome enough to set conjecture on edge immediately. The whole turnout, girl, cart, and horse, was decidedly chic. There was none of that pathetic suggestion of decay that covered everything else I had come in contact with in this neighborhood. She was riding rapidly and skillfully. Curled up at her feet in the cart was a little barefoot darkey, whose woolly head and rolling eyeballs were just visible over the dashboard. Brown-paper parcels, of assorted shapes and sizes, filled all the space in the cart not occupied by the young woman and her ebony attendant. I took in all these details as she was advancing on us, and experienced a decided glow of satisfaction on discovering anything so bright and promising in a locality where the dead past seemed forever evoking ghostly memories. Of course Scipio could tell me all about her. I only wondered he had not done so before. She tightened her

hold on the reins suddenly, and came to a halt just as she reached us. I lifted my hat impressively. She gave me a swift, cool glance, acknowledged my uncovered head with a barely perceptible nod, and let her eyes travel over my shoulder to rest on Scipio:

"You had better turn down the lane when you get to it, old man," she said in a clear, rather high-pitched voice; "your Miss Ransom is in trouble, but she would rather die than let me help her out of it. Somebody had better go to the rescue." She supplemented this advice with a derisive little laugh, and allowed her fine eyes to rest on me in another one of those fleeting glances that had the effect of making me feel inordinately insignificant. She touched up her horse and whirled onward so rapidly that in a few seconds nothing but receding clouds of dust remained of the pleasant apparition.

"Who is that?" I asked of Scipio as he started forward again at his very briskest shuffle.

"Ol' man Maxwell's daughter," he answered; "she lives t'yother side Crooked Crick. I wonder w'at's come t' Miss 'Tildy now? That chile cert'n'y do have a hard row t' hoe in dis worl'."

It was evident that I should have to bide my time for information concerning the girl in the village-cart, for at that juncture Scipio turned aside, and leaping the open ditch which ran along the entire boundary fence, informed me that he was going to take a short cut to the lane, but advised me not to follow for the sake of my "good clothes."

"I'm gwine a briary way, son, en you bes' keep 'long de big road. Mebbe it mou't be es well fur you to keep straight on t' de big house. It mou't sorter

flustergate Miss 'Tildy to have strangers 'bout ef de ol' man's be'n at it ag'in."

He was gone before I could tell him that I did not propose to be left out of this relief expedition. It was a golden opportunity to become acquainted with my neighbors, that I could not afford to slight. That expression of Scipio's about the old man's having been "at it" again brought me to the conclusion that Scipio might not be the only one in the neighborhood who was going a "briary way." I was fired with a chivalric desire to do something substantial for that girl who was in trouble of some sort down the lane. I almost wished it might be a rather desperate emergency. What an eventful day! Two young women crowded into its narrow space! I wanted very much to hear more about that girl in the village-cart. I wanted to know why she had laid such contemptuous emphasis on the word *me*. I wanted to know what feud existed between two of the very few young people this meagrely peopled neighborhood contained. I wanted to know the secret of the defiant little laugh she had uttered when she raised the whip to start the pony forward again. And I wanted, above all things, to know why, when I had been expressing a very young man's natural craving for feminine society, neither Scipio nor the business manager should have mentioned a Miss Maxwell. She must live within calling distance, else she could not be driving along the road so near the Holcombe house with nothing but that barefooted ape (I am afraid I called him) curled up at her feet. Curiosity had had so little to feed on for a while that it was ravening.

Perhaps it would have been better if I had taken

Scipio's advice and kept straight on to the big house, for I am afraid my sudden appearance on the scene did have the effect of flustering Miss Ransom painfully, but I have never been sorry for my intrusion on that occasion. There's no knowing when another opportunity may have come to me. I had made up my mind before reaching the lane as to the description of catastrophe which had overtaken her. I was satisfied that their decrepit old buggy had finally yielded up the ghost of usefulness.

Scipio's short cut had gotten him there sufficiently in advance of me for him to have been of substantial aid, but it seemed to me more hands were wanting. Sitting on a stump which was located conveniently near the scene of disaster was old Major Ransom. His hat was shoved very far back on his gray hair, and his blue eyes dim from excess followed Scipio's nimble motions as he tried to back the frightened horse into the shafts he had just wound clumsily with rope. The old man's voice came to me in a plaintive monologue before any of them discovered my presence.

"It all comes from Matilda's obstinacy, I tell you, Scip. She would take the reins out of my hands. Said I couldn't be trusted. Trusted! Chil-'ren didn't talk to fathers that way before the war, Scip. Everything's changed, everything's gone to the dev'l, boy; yessir, t' the dev'l. Come up to the house and get a toddy t'night, Scip. Haven't a cent of cash t' pay you for pulling us t'gether. Perhaps Miss Matilda will let you have a toddy. We'll have to ask her. She carries the keys. The old man's pushed to the wall, you know; yessir, t' the wall. How's your new yankee friend, Scip? Better t' tie to than the old ones,

hey? More money. They've got it all and we've got nothing, Scip; we're gone to the dogs; yessir, gone to the dogs, every mother's son of us."

His dim blue eyes wandered wistfully over the scene of disaster as he swayed helplessly on the stump. Miss Ransom had been gathering the widely scattered contents of the buggy and replacing them under the seat while Scip had been patching things up. A little basket redolent of crushed thyme and sweet-basil had been hurled quite a distance. It lay just across my path, and I seized it, glad of even so slender a pretext for addressing the young lady. She started violently at my nearer approach, and dropped a handful of eggs she had just rescued from the wreck. I thought for a second that the deep red flush that covered her pale face to the very roots of her shining hair was the outcome of a false shame. She resented a stranger's seeing her poor little makeshifts for a living. It touched her patrician pride. I despised her for it but mentally apologized when she glanced towards her father, on the stump, in evident confusion. "Cannot I be of some service to Miss Ransom?" I said with boyish eagerness, pressing forward to Scipio's assistance. The troubled look in her serious eyes made me sorry I had come. She should see how finely I could ignore the fact that the old man on the stump there was not all that a daughter's heart could desire. But he wasn't on the stump now. He was standing up and trying to assume a certain rigidity of spine, which under more propitious circumstances might have passed for dignity. "Scipio," he said, thickly, swaying slowly backward and forward on his poor old untrustworthy heels, "introduce me to your

friend. I suppose that is y'r frien'"; he essayed to reach his hat, which resulted in a disastrous forward lurch that left him reclining against the dashboard of the buggy, over which he scrutinized me unfavorably.

"Halsey," I said, lifting my hat with airy acceptance of all that was awkward in the situation. "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Major Ransom."

"Pleasure, 'd you say? Yessir, my name's Ransom; and so yours is Halsey. Well, Scipio," he looked away from me as loftily as circumstances would permit, "tell your friend, Mr. Halsey, when Major Ransom and Miss Matilda Ransom stand in need of help from their enemies, they will notify him. Matilda, let me have your arm. We can walk home."

She gave it with alacrity. But she was not as merciless as he. She looked at me seriously over the ridgy spinal column of the horse we had finally backed into the shafts, and said in her slow, cultured voice:

"I am very sorry it should have happened, sir."

I looked after them as they walked away down the lane—she tall and strong, and stately as a young empress; the old man feeble, embittered, unforgiving, shambling along by her side, with uneven gait and bowed shoulders. I could have laughed aloud but for the pathos of it.

"Dar' now, w'at I b'en tol' you?" said Scipio, angrily, as he gathered the reins up and prepared to take the ramshackle buggy home for its patrician owners. "I knowed it would pester Miss 'Tildy t' hev' you 'bout. De ol' man don' of'en git in dat fix, but de Ransoms is seen a sight er trouble, dey is dat. En dey is of de proud sort, dey is dat."

I stood rooted to the spot while Scipio, not trusting himself to the fragile vehicle, but walking alongside it, with the reins held in his hand, followed in the wake of the Ransoms. I had been undeniably snubbed; clearly and definitely snubbed. I seated myself on the stump vacated by Major Ransom to await Scipio's return. I knew his dread of "fooling away" time, when his tenure of the cabin on the creek was so slight, and felt sure he would come back to me as soon as possible.

"You wait'n' yit, boss?" he said, coming along in a great hurry when he did come. "I 'lowed you'd gone home long 'go."

"No," I said, getting up from the stump to join him. "I wanted to take some information home with me." I had concluded to ignore the Ransoms for the time being. I foresaw that I should have to labor hard for recognition in that direction. "I want to hear something more about the young lady in the village-cart."

"Miss Ma'y?" He raised his eyebrows in evident surprise, then added patronizingly: "Miss Ma'y's all well 'nough, fur's she goes; I ain' got nothin' ag'in Miss Ma'y. I don't b'leeve Miss Ma'y would hu't a mice, I don't dat."

"Why shouldn't Miss Ransom accept aid from her?"

Scipio's nose went up in a very contemptuous angle. "Kase she's a different sort. You mout es well try to mek ile and water mix es to mek Miss 'Tildy friendly wid Miss Ma'y Maxwell. None er our folks ain't never hed nuthin' t' do wid de Maxwells. You see, ol' man Maxwell, Miss Ma'y's pa, were a trader, en Miss

'Tildy's pa, he were a regular ol'-timer. The Ransoms goes a'most es fur back es de Frasers, not quite, doa."

"What sort of a trader?" I asked, always curious about the nice distinctions these old-timers drew.

"Well, you may call him a all-round trader. He use t' come yhere from Firginny and Alabama wid black folks to sell. His yard, hit was up yon' to Greenbrier, en w'en he sol' out, he'd go over inter Texis en lay he's money out in Texis ponies; den he come 'long back en trade dem off. He warn't married den. Dat war long in de forties. Old Marse Wilson, he got so deep in Trader Maxwell's debt dat he hed t' give up his Crooked Crick place. Miss Ma'y she were born right dar. But dey ain' never got in wid de ol'-timers yit. Folks say it was Miss Ma'y Maxwell dat come betwixt Miss 'Tildy en Mars Fraze, en made all dat trouble. Miss Ma'y's pa's daid now. Her en her ma en her cripple' brother lives on at de ol' Wilson place. Ol' man Maxwell lef' a pile er money. De ol' place cert'n'y is good t' look at. I'll tek you by dat way some time. But our sort er folks don' take no stock in de trader's fam'ly. Dey sont Miss Ma'y 'way t' school, en, sir, she kin jes' make a piany talk. Miss Ma'y's mighty smart; but she'll hafter be smarter yit fo' she gits Miss 'Tildy Ransom to darken her do'. You see, the ol' man were a trader. Dat's 'nough."

It was more than enough. I thought of the girl with the clear gray eyes and the mocking face I had caught such a brief glimpse of. I thought of the proud poise of her pretty head, crowned with its jaunty little sailor cap banded with blue ribbon. I had found her altogether eye-satisfying. I understood better now the querulous tones of her voice, and that

short, defiant laugh. And I knew why she had swept me with that slight, cold glance. Evidently Miss Maxwell was accustomed to guard against slights; she was a dainty little Ishmaelite, ready to lift her hand against everybody. I marvelled why they should have consented to remain in a locality where social recognition was a thing not to be hoped for, instead of making a home somewhere else in this roomy world.

This episode of the trader's daughter opened a fresh field of speculation. I bade fair to become quite a sociologist perforce of circumstances. Those "old-timers" had bought and sold slaves for their own personal gain or comfort. They did conscience no violence in their transactions, but the medium of that interchange was an absolute pariah. The men who made use of him recoiled frigidly from any dealings with him outside the strict boundaries of business. He was a creature created by their necessities. Unto the third and fourth generation, the taint of the negro-trader's blood vitiated the veins of a progeny that otherwise could well have held its own against social competitors.

"I'se 'bleeze' to say, howsomedever," Scipio said, very suddenly, "that when it come t' fightin', them Maxwells, the old man and his boy Jimmy—dey calls him, Bud—showed fa'r 'nough. Ain' you never bin yhere uv Maxwell's bat'ry?"

I had not. Scipio looked up at the sun. It was immediately over our heads. Round shadows encircled the tree trunks. "Twelve o'clock!" he said, getting in a ludicrous hurry as we neared his cabin. "Anarky gwine give me a scworchin' fur keepin' vittles in de pot so long. I gwine tell you 'bout Max-

well's bat'ry t'night, son. 'But you needn' let on 'bout it."

Scipio was always warning me against letting the manager know the subject matter of our talk.

CHAPTER V.

THE FATE OF BIG-A-PLENTY.

"TELL me how to get to 'Big-a-Plenty,'" I said one morning to the business manager, stopping to consult my memorandum book to make sure I was giving the absurd name of the plantation correctly.

"Just the other side of Nigger-Trader Maxwell's, old Wilson's place, they call it. Cross Crooked Creek at Julian's Fork, that's right opposite Maxwell's gin. Ride two miles——"

"I don't intend to ride at all," I here interrupted.

The business manager looked at me and whistled. He always whistled when things struck him as being peculiarly ridiculous. I think the business manager disapproved of me on general principles. He seemed to suffer from the chronic apprehension that I was there to supplant him, or to maintain a sort of espionage over him in syndicate interests. He never lavished any courtesy on me. There was something especially irritating in his whistle that morning. It goaded me into saying, tartly:

"You people down here would saddle a horse to ride across the street, I do believe, rather than use your own legs."

"P'r'aps; but as we ain't never found out yet how to walk on the water like St. Peter done, we prefer four legs to two when there's creeks in the question.

Maybe that's one of the things you folks up yonder have found out."

"Scipio can put me across the creek, and I can find my own way to Big-a-Plenty," I said, which settled the matter as far as the business manager was concerned.

"Big-a-Plenty," I knew from the diagram of the syndicate lands, was a small, wedge-shaped plantation that was pocketed between two of its larger purchases. The title to it was as clear as spring-water. I was going to it that day to get the signature of the owner's wife, who was unable to appear at the notary's office in town. Scipio, too, looked unduly surprised when I told him I was going to walk to Big-a-Plenty. "You's undertakin' a good deal, son," said he, pushing his clumsy, flat-bottomed scow free of the bank, before embarking himself, "but I s'pose you knows what you's 'bout."

Yes, I knew quite well what I was about. I was about to give the indolent natives of this slumberous locality a lesson in independent activity.

"I don't suppose I can get lost," I said, stepping ashore on the other side of the creek, "and I'll see a new part of the country."

"N–o, you cyarn' git los'," Scipio answered, with plaintive emphasis on the word "lost," which left the inference that there was no end of things worse to have happen to one than getting lost in the woods about Crooked Creek. "Jes' keep straight 'long up the crick, son, tell you git to de Maxwell place, den you kin see Big-a-Plenty," he called out after me, as I strode confidently away from him in accordance with

the directions he had impressed upon me while paddling across.

The path was narrow, nothing more than a trail made by the cattle coming down to the creek to drink. Scipio had told me of a big road further back, but it had windings and forks that might mislead, and would take about three times as long. The morning was bright, and I felt the accumulated vigor of all my woodland tramps with old Scipio bounding in my veins. Crooked Creek ran merrily by over its bed, now so shallow that I could see the many-colored pebbles glistening under the water, again deep and rapid over the treacherous quicksands that made it a terror to travellers not quite sure of the ford. But I was independent of fords. I was on the side of the creek where duty called, and all I had to do was to tramp through the leaf-strewn byway, breathing in the sweet pure air in great gulps; essaying to count the innumerable musical changes in the mocking-bird's notes, and familiarizing myself with the different sorts of trees that towered above me with the keen zest of a man entirely unable to tell a sycamore from an elder, until I should come to Maxwell's, which, Scipio had told me, was "smack" on the creek. That was all I did do until I suddenly found the earth apparently receding from me in the most treacherous manner without a moment's notice. I had stepped into what seemed to be a reservoir for all the dead leaves that had ever fallen during all the autumns that the world had ever known. Nothing but leaves. A bottomless mass of them. A few moments of vigorous plunging forward procured me a stronger footing. Investigation showed an immense stump-hole into which the leaves had

drifted until level with the surrounding ground. I was brilliantly frescoed with leaves of every conceivable tint which clung to me in spite of my energetic stamping and shaking and plucking. A rustling in the dead mass from which I had just rescued myself made me glance around somewhat nervously. Scip' had said something about snakes. Evidently I had invaded the home of an indignant moccasin. With his hideous flat black head raised resentfully, and his cotton-lined mouth showing the full capacity of his slimy throat, he slowly advanced upon me.

My interest in the coating of damp autumn leaves I had taken on was suddenly diminished. I crashed forward along my narrow way, intent upon putting as much space as possible between myself and that outraged moccasin. My interest in the notes of the mocking-bird and the musical ripple of the pebbly creek also grew less, as the sinuous windings of the cattle trail led me between the close-growing ranks of the cockle-burrs, brown and green, that seized upon my woolen clothes, clinging to me in thick masses, until I was endued in a bristling coat of mail. I could have wished my worst enemy no worse luck than to have run against me accidentally. Whatever space on my surface not preëmpted by the burrs and the autumn leaves was promptly appropriated by the prickly fruit of the *echinospernum*. That is not what the natives call the vicious little flat green things that cleave with a death-grip; they call them "beggar's lice," which does not sound nice or scientific. It was not of myself in a scientific aspect that I was pondering, however, as I plunged forward, taking tribute from all the prickly, burry things that flourished in these semi-

tropical woods, but of that exasperating whistle of the business manager's.

I began to understand why the "indolent natives of that slumberous locality" were not given to jungle explorations. I found myself anxiously speculating as to the probability of Miss Mary Maxwell's being visible when I should suddenly emerge from the woods in front of her home, as Scipio had told me I should.

A second only before the trim, white house, set well back in a rather prim-looking front yard, burst upon my vision; I heard the yelping of a dog and the angry tones of a man's voice mingling with the hissing sound of a lash. There was a horse-block in front of the Maxwells' house, close by a rack, over which grew a spreading paper-mulberry tree. Sitting on the lowest step of this block was a young man. He was holding a magnificent setter's head firmly between his knees as he curled a long buggy-whip mercilessly around and around its back. A pair of crutches leaned against the horse-block. As soon as I saw the crutches I knew the man on the block must be the "Bud" Maxwell of whom I had heard. He had lost a leg during the war, and people said it "hadn't improved his temper any." He saw me almost as soon as I saw him. I don't think he meant me to hear his vigorous but well modulated "I'll be dogged!"

He loosed his hold on the setter's head, and stared frankly at me as I advanced unblushingly under my variegated accretions. It is a good rule to take the initiative in acknowledging one's own absurdity. It is the rule I adopted on this occasion.

"Mr. Maxwell," I said, stopping by the horse-block and extending my hand, "I believe that's the only

part of me that has not got a burr on it. I'm on my way to Big-a-Plenty. It's just beyond here, I think."

"Oh! yes, you're the Yan—Boston lawyer, I suppose." He dropped my hand and reached for his crutches, by the help of which he got on his one leg. "You didn't walk through these woods? I'll be dogged if you ain't the first thing with a cuticle that ever did do it. You'd better come up to the house and let 'em curry you off before you go on."

I objected on the score of ladies.

"Mary's off somewhere in the cart, and Ma don't count. Come up and take a drink, anyhow. I reckon you did think Kuklux had got you."

This was the first offer of hospitality that had been extended me. There were several reasons why I had better accept it. One strong one was that the young man was Miss Maxwell's brother. You see, I had been used to girls up home, my own sisters and other fellows' sisters, and I couldn't make up my mind to fill my life with Scipio and the business manager.

Evidently Mr. Bud Maxwell considered me a pleasant variation to the day's monotony. He was a superb-looking fellow, towering far above me as we walked up the bright-red brick walk towards the low, white house, primly veiled by pink crape myrtles, set at exactly so many feet from each one of the gallery posts. I began to think his bad qualities had been exaggerated by report, and that he really would be worth cultivating for himself. Signs of thrift met me on the threshold of the Maxwell's home. Strewn along the railing of the front gallery was wearing apparel belonging to both sexes. A quilting frame was stretched on four chairs at one end of the veranda,

at which, with her back to us, sat a lady quilting on a piece of gorgeous "rising sun" patchwork.

"Ma, here's a visitor," my companion called out, as he planted his crutch on the lowest step. It caused the quilter to rise with such precipitancy that her chair fell backwards on the gallery with noisy awkwardness.

"Goodness, gracious me!" she said, coming forward, smoothing her thin hair nervously down with both hands. "I'm sure I'm very glad to see anybody, but I hate anybody to find the place so tumbled up; it's the red ants that keep me busy. It's such a rare thing to see anybody, that anybody would think I was scared of 'em. Before the war, people used to be passing here all the time, and Mr. Maxwell, he was for keeping open house always, but things have changed a heap since the war." All this in one unpunctuated breath, with her faded blue eyes resting now on me, now anxiously on "Bud."

"Call Dane, will you, ma, and have the burrs picked off—come to think of it, I have not any name to introduce you by."

"Halsey," I announced.

"Halsey—and—here you Nash!"

From somewhere in the rear a small, meagre person appeared, nimbly and noiselessly running on bare feet. "Hump yourself and get me some fresh mint out of the garden." It was quite evident that everybody "humped" themselves when young Mr. Maxwell's wishes were under consideration.

"Goodness, graciousness me, Bud," Mrs. Maxwell said, examining me solicitously, "you'd better get your friend to put on some of your clothes and let Dane

give his a good cleanin'. You say you walked up from Holcombe's by way of the creek? Goodness, gracious me, nobody ever thinks of trying to walk anywhere here, there's too much mud and briars and snakes and things. Before the war Mr. Maxwell used to try to keep a good road cut out through these woods, because it makes such a purty drive, but things have changed a heap since then."

Dane was on hand by this time, and began the currying process. "You must make your friend stay to dinner, Bud. You'll have to take pot luck. I used to take pride in my table, but what with free niggers and everything stolen right from under your nose, I don't take any pride in anything these days. If it wasn't for Bud there, I'd be for selling this place to you all, too, and getting plum out of the country, but he won't hear to it. Now I'll see what Jane's going to give us for dinner."

"You are attached to this place, I suppose," I said, looking at the trader's handsome son over Dane's shoulder.

"It's a good place to hide in," he said, shortly and bitterly. Then more lightly, as he looked with amusement at the pile of burrs accumulating on the gallery floor, "Why didn't you come by Julian's Ford? That's the way everybody comes."

"Because I wanted to prove myself wiser than everybody, I suppose. Why do you call it Julian's Ford? It's pretty, but I don't see the application."

"It's called Julian's Ford because there isn't any ford at all there, and there never was any Julian about."

"Oh, now, my goodness gracious me, Bud" (Mrs.

Maxwell reappeared at that moment) "how ridiculous you do make things. This place belonged to Mr. Julian before ever it belonged to the Wilsons; that was before you were born, and there was a ford here before your pa put the boat in the creek. You can see the boat from here. No, you can't either, right now; it's on the other side. Mamie's gone to town again to-day. She told me she saw you on the road with old Scipio. How that old fellow does hold out! It was just after she found the Ransoms all gone to pieces on the road. If it wasn't for the sin of it, a body would say it served them right; they're too proud to breathe. Before the war Mr. Maxwell kept a regular ferryman down there at the boat to cross people; but now, whenever you come, you can just cordelle yourself across. A child ten years old can manage that boat. Sam, that little black fellow you saw with Mamie yesterday, cordelles her across. She don't even get out of the buggy; though, I must say, I think that's real fool-hardy. I've give up trying to make Mamie and Bud go my way. Since the war I don't seem to have no mind of my own left."

"I wish you'd mix two juleps, ma, if Nash has brought the mint. We've got two minds to drink them."

It was plain that Mrs. Maxwell was accustomed to minister to her son's comfort in this line, for she returned presently with two glasses of the fragrant mixture as skillfully prepared as if she had spent the best part of her life behind a bar.

I think I quite disappointed them both by my persistent refusal to remain to dinner. "I must get to Big-a-Plenty and transact my business there

did not admit that I lacked the moral courage in my disreputable condition to face Miss Maxwell, whom I remembered as a particularly dainty-looking young woman.

"You are going to get rained on," Bud said, walking as far as the horse-block with me, "and old man Wilson's got no room for you, so you'd better stop on your way back and stay all night. Kuklux might get after you if you go back to Holcombe's after dark." He always accompanied any allusion to these mythical regulators with his most unpleasant laugh. Mrs. Maxwell, too, had walked as far as the gate. She wanted to see if "Mamie" was coming. "It just keeps my heart in my mouth," she said, plaintively, "to have that child act so independent. And I expect people talk about it too. Driving about with nothing but that miserable little Sam to protect her. But goodness gracious me, you can't make a prisoner of a girl. And what are you going to do? Before the war—There she is now."

Mrs. Maxwell's face changed magically. Her faded eyes grew luminous. It was a sight to brighten any mother's face. The long flat-boat, secured to either shore by rings over a stout cable, had just moved slowly out from the opposite shore, under the impulsion given it by Sam's small black hands. Sitting erect in the buggy was the trader's daughter, unconscious of the eyes that were watching her approach. A bank of black and gray clouds obscured the sun and cast softening shadows over the brilliant little equipage with its garish yellow wheels. She had found a lot of crimson berries somewhere, and had pinned them in her bosom. I waited to gaze as long as I dared and

then started off briskly in the direction of Big-a-Plenty, under a halfway promise to spend the night at the Maxwells' if I got back to Julian's Ford after sunset.

Big-a-Plenty was scarcely more than a mile further on down a good plain road. As I opened the unpainted gate and started up the short, unbricked walk that led to the house, I was convinced that here at least the syndicate's purchase must prove a godsend. Poverty and weeds flaunted their presence insolently before my eyes. The opening of the gate had evoked the entire tribe from the interior of the house, which was scarcely more than a hovel. An old man had been dozing in a chair in the gallery with a handkerchief thrown over his face. He started to his feet confusedly, as one of a baker's dozen of girls stooped and informed him very audibly that "Some folks was coming up the walk."

I wondered if these people were so used to taking humanity by the gross that they recognized no single personality. I made some remark to the patriarch of this tribe about his exceedingly full quiver.

"They ain't all mine, you see. Most of 'em's grandchildren." Then he undertook to explain to me which of them was Benny's and which were Ham's, dully supplementing the information by the statement, "Both our boys were took during the war, and me and ma have to look out for them all. Not that we begrudges them a single mouthful, but we've made up our minds to sell out the old place and move out to Nebrasky. I'd rather some of 'em were boys, but the Master knows best, I reckon."

This brought us immediately to business, and I explained who I was. There was a look of delighted

expectation on every one of the faces in that Big-a-Plenty family, and when the patriarch explained to "ma," who was painfully deaf, that "Lawyer Halsey" had come to get her signature to the deed for the old place, she looked at me with almost a grateful expression on her careworn face.

"It's best so," she said, quickly brushing away a threatening tear. "The boys are gone, old man, and there's no more coming on to take their place. I'm ready to sign my name."

The transfer was quickly made and Big-a-Plenty was swallowed up.

As I started back towards Julian's Ford some hours later I found myself questioning if we at the North, who fought and suffered, but conquered and came back to unharmed homes, could quite take in yet what that fight had been to these vanquished brothers of ours. Was there one unscarred home, one unscourged heart, to be found throughout the length and breadth of this land? I doubted it. The Holcombes and the Ransoms, haughty aristocrats, had given their all. The plebeian trader had given his money and his life —what could a man give more? The lonely patriarch had given the sons that should have been the props of his old age. As one man they sacrificed, as one man they suffered. The Pharisee that lurks in every unregenerate soul asks —"Was it a judgment?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF A BAD DAY.

OF all the unpalatable duties that fell to my lot as attorney for the Boston syndicate, that one of carrying the title-deeds to the Big-a-Plenty plantation for signature was the most unpalatable. One of those "chords" which Mr. Guppy so vaguely locates vibrated painfully in some part of my anatomy at sight of the pathetic dignity the Patriarch and his ancient wife brought to bear upon the signing away of their home. I wanted to get away from them as soon as possible after the transfer was made. I saw the Patriarch look wistfully down at his wife as she dropped the pen from her poor old withered hand to carry to her eyes a corner of the handkerchief that was folded about her neck, and I felt uncommonly like an executioner as I buttoned those papers into my breast-pocket and turned to leave.

The Patriarch followed me to the front steps and did what all those people invariably do when they get from under a roof—looked up at the sky very knowingly and stretched his brown hand out, for a fleshly barometer.

"We'd be glad to have you stay and take a bite with us, young man," he said cordially. "I won't promise you much, but a warm welcome's better than a cold wetting. You mustn't mind if ma does take on a little. You see, it goes rather hard with her to give up

the old place, but we lost all our hands when freedom come, and then both the boys were took, and this is a mighty poor country for a man that's got no backing, and so—oh, well, there ain't no manner of use crying over spilt milk. Sha'n't I tell Nora, she's my son Ben's oldest, to put a plate on the dinner table for you?"

I thanked him and said: "No; I must be getting on towards home," laying as much stress on the word "home" as if I had been a householder with a wife and six anxious children looking out for my return. I was quite sure it was "not going to rain."

"Mebbe you are right and I am wrong," the Patriarch said modestly, then held out his hand with a gentle smile. "I'm sure I'm obliged to you for explaining things so patiently to ma. Women folks most generally are trying when it comes to business. You'd better stay and have a bite."

"Your wife is a heroine," I said, and left him looking perplexedly after me.

I took my first lesson in practical meteorology and my second in humility that day, in consequence of rejecting this kind invitation of the Patriarch's. I made the humiliating discovery, before ten more minutes had elapsed, that the very birds of the air and beasts of the field were more weatherwise than I.

The road that led back to Julian's Ford was lined on either side with dense masses of forest trees. I suppose I gave these tall, sombre trees the credit for the sudden darkness that seemed to overtake me as soon as I closed the Big-a-Plenty yard gate. I had not acquired the local habit of consulting the clouds. I was thinking of the chance that had transferred the ragged

little cotton place I had just left behind me from the attached ownership of an impovished old man into that of an immensely rich corporation for which it could never possess any tender associations. It was intensely still there on that quiet country road, with not a moving thing but myself in sight. The uneasy twittering of some birds in the branches over my head presently drew me out of my unprofitable reverie. I could see them flitting restlessly from one tree to another. A lot of fat white pigs passed me at a brisk trot, squealing nervously as they sniffed the air suspiciously with their pink noses. A stately turkey-hen, with her head held anxiously to one side, stepped into the road before me, uttering plaintive notes of encouragement to her straggling callow brood, as she urged them forward. While I was pondering the probable cause of this patent anxiety in the animal kingdom, there came a crash of thunder overhead that brought me to a standstill, and caused those heedless young feathered truants to exert their utmost speed along the dusty road. It was not like any thunder I had ever heard before. There was no premonitory rumble. It was rather like a grand discharge of artillery. I elevated my head precisely as those absurd pigs had done. The deathlike stillness that succeeded to that startling single clap was broken by the rustling of a million leaves. The young pines on either side of the road bent their plumed heads unresistingly. A few enormous drops fell at great distances apart in the dusty road as if they had been accidentally spilled and were swallowed up. Then another profound hush. It was as if all nature had swooned. Perhaps I could still make Julian's Ford and cordelle

myself across before the storm burst in earnest. That was my first experience of a storm with a prelude. I soon ceased making any calculations. In fact, it had been a day of miscalculations.

I never undertook to describe anything more exciting than the capture of a tramp by a Boston policeman without failing ignominiously, and I shall not try to describe that storm. It was simply a bewildering elemental confusion, crash after crash of thunder, followed swiftly by blinding flashes of lightning that veined the skies and made the earth lurid. I was confused by the swaying limbs of the tall trees that interlocked their arms in wild momentary embraces across my path, and am satisfied that nothing but the shortness of my hair saved me from Absalom's fate. Great limbs were rent from their sockets and sent whirling through the darkened air over my head. The rain fell on the leaves in the thick branches like a rattling discharge of musketry. I could hear the swift rushing of the swollen waters in the pebbly bed of Crooked Creek, but could not see it for the trees. In the midst of the uproar I remembered with gratitude that the Maxwell carriage-house stood on the roadside, outside the yard fence. If I could gain that shelter I could stay there until this tropical tempest had spent its fury.

I remember thinking, as I scudded before the wind, with my head tucked well down inside my soaked coat-collar, that when we spoke of a "stormy day" up home, we meant leaking skies and slippery sidewalks, with a general irruption of waterproofs and umbrellas—but really, to be taken unawares in this boisterous fashion!

I sprang with a bound under the projecting roof of

the Maxwell carriage-house, and congratulated myself that the opening faced the creek, so that my ridiculous situation would remain undiscovered by the family. I had nothing to do but to stand and wait and philosophize. There was a bale of hay under this shed, resting on skids. It looked dryer on top of that bale of hay than on the ground, where little rivulets were meandering. I was so thoroughly drenched that I might reasonably have been indifferent to standing in the rivulets, but, leaping lightly on the hay, I brought my hat on a level with the slatted tops of the front wall. Fatal leap!

"My goodness gracious me, ain't that you, Mr. Halsey? And you're as wet as a rat."

I had no words of denial for inquiry or for assertion. I looked through the slats that were on a level with my drenched shoulders and shivered, not, however, exclusively from physical discomfort. Inside the carriage-house, sitting high and dry in the village cart, with their four eyes resting placidly on me, were Mrs. Maxwell and her daughter. My first impulse was to sink out of sight by simply dropping on the bale of hay, but the elder woman made this impossible by plunging breathlessly into an explanation, while she held me as the Ancient Mariner held his victims with a glittering eye.

"I've got a turkey-hen out in the woods somewhere," she said, in that swift monologue of hers, "with her young, as fine a brood as I ever turned off, but no sign of the red yet—you know turkeys can't stand getting wet before the red comes—but I do sometimes wonder, seeing what an awful lot of trouble they are, how the wild turkeys get along with nobody

to rush after them at the first sign of rain, and I knew as soon as the pigs came squealing home with straws in their snouts that we was in for a regular cyclone, and I said to Mamie I was going up the road to make sure she shouldn't get wet—the turkey-hen I mean—and Mamie said as she didn't have anything better to do, she'd come along with me—my goodness gracious me, here I'm rattling on and you and Mamie haven't been introduced yet—my daughter, Miss Maxwell, Mr. Halsey; Mamie, Mr. Halsey."

I lifted my dripping hat from my bewildered head and bowed through the slats to Miss Maxwell, who returned the formality with a gravely imperturbable inclination of her pretty head. It was only by a sudden and somewhat vicious closing of her white teeth on a straw she had been twisting about her fingers that I could detect any emotion. I think she wanted to giggle. "Before the war," Mrs. Maxwell resumed, breathlessly, "I could 'a' started a dozen niggers after that turkey-hen, but now—thank goodness," (with a sudden change of inflection) "there's Sam with umbrellas and gums."

While I was wondering confusedly if Mrs. Maxwell's remarkable loquacity necessitated relays of "gums," Sam made his appearance with two pairs of rubber shoes and two umbrellas. He grinned impartially on the three weatherbound inmates of the carriage-house. At sight of him Mrs. Maxwell clambered down from the village-cart in fluttering haste, and with Sam's aid was soon encased in one pair of the gum shoes.

"Now, then, Mr. Halsey, you get right down from that bale of hay and go up to the house with Mamie under the other umbrella, and get into some of Bud's

clothes as quick as you can. It's locking the stable after the horse is stolen, I reckon, but I'm going after that turkey-hen, Sam and me. My goodness gracious me, why couldn't the creature stay where she belonged. Thank goodness, the worst of the storm's over; it's just sobbing itself out now. My goodness gracious, where's the boat?"

As this was something I was particularly interested in, I sprang from my perch and looked anxiously toward the swollen creek. The ropes by which the ferry flat was cordelled had parted during the storm, and there, beating against the opposite shore helplessly, was my only means of escape from the culminating annoyances of that disastrous day.

"I am afraid," said the trader's daughter, in measured, cultured tones, that afforded a singular contrast to her mother's tumultuous delivery, "that this will render your remaining all night compulsory. I hope my brother will be able to make the infliction endurable. May I trouble you?" She extended me the umbrella she had opened while speaking, and gathering her skirts daintily in both hands she signified her expectation that I would protect her from the rain. There was nothing for it but mute acceptance of the situation. I think Miss Maxwell quite hated me for having been thrown upon her hospitality. It had become a duty to treat me decently. She talked well and impersonally during the short walk to the house, principally on the characteristics of thunder-storms in that neighborhood; but after she had turned me over to "Bud," who stood at the top of the gallery steps watching our approach, she washed her hands of me, so to speak, with evident relief.

As soon as possible after the inordinately heavy and late supper of hot breads and fried meats had been disposed of, she withdrew into the parlor, separating herself from the little group which Mrs. Maxwell, her son, and I formed on one corner of the dark gallery. I had observed her as we rose from the table saying something in an impressive undertone to her brother. It sounded like an earnest request. Whatever it was, it only elicited a defiant little laugh. I found out later on what she had asked him. "Did you hear what Mamie said?" Mr. Bud Maxwell asked, with frank treachery, holding a lighted match to my cigar. "She asked me for pity's sake not to get on war times. She says that's about all we can talk about. I don't know but what she's right. You see the world came to an end for some of us when the Confederacy was wound up, and we've never had anything to talk about since. Mamie never saw any of the fighting. The only soldiers she ever saw was the battery, as the people about here call it, as if there never had been but one battery in the world."

"That was Mr. Maxwell's battery, I suppose?" I said.

"No, sir; Holcombe's battery. It was Holcombe everything in this neighborhood then. Father got up the battery, went to New Orleans, drummed up the recruits, paid their expenses up here, uniformed them, and put them in the field. They were a lot of swell creoles, and how many of them do you suppose would have enlisted under the banner of a negro-trader? There was one name in this neighborhood that everything went down before, and when father put Frazer Holcombe at the head of that battery, he did a right

sharp thing. It gave the battery prestige, you see. By George! he was a handsome figure, too. I don't wonder all the girls lost their heads when Frazer Holcombe put on his uniform. Some of them are wearing the willow for him yet."

I had seen what neither Maxwell nor his mother was in position to see. The shades in the parlor, some sort of white stuff, had been drawn down. The lamp in the centre of that room projected Miss Maxwell's shadow against this shade. She had been standing just inside the window. With a swift motion she disappeared, and the next moment a burst of melody escaped from the piano in the corner with the most distracting effect upon me. I was quite sure she had timed this interruption carefully.

"Was Mr. Frazer Holcombe killed during the war?" I asked, never losing sight of the syndicate's interest in this young man.

"He never even smelt gunpowder," said Maxwell, bitterly—"at least not at the head of that battery. The battery was camped out just across Crooked Creek there; maybe you saw a little wooden cross there, with a Cherokee rose growing over it—no; you came up on this side of the creek; I forgot; well, that cross is over all that's left of one poor fellow that gave up the ghost before the battery went into action. He was brought here by Mamie's orders, and died right in this house. Mamie had always been fond of prowling around in the woods and she'd been out muscadining that morning, and found this chap in the woods. She says he shot himself accidentally. She ran back to the quarters for some of the men and had him brought up here. He never

spoke a word after we got him here. I wish he had; I'd have liked to hear his story."

"You think perhaps Miss Maxwell was mistaken?"

He was silent for a while. Mrs. Maxwell had long since gone into the house. I could see her silhouetted on the parlor shade, drawing a needle with a preternaturally long thread attached to it swiftly in and out of some fabric. The music still went on.

"Mamie started that piano," her brother said, with a short, unpleasant laugh, "thinking it would create a diversion. She never likes to talk or let me talk about that occurrence. I'm not doing it entirely for gossip's sake now. I don't believe Frazer Holcombe's dead, though Nannie Holcombe's husband, the one that's so anxious to sell the place to your syndicate, will try to prove that he is. I liked Holcombe. He was a gentleman, but he had the devil's own temper. He's just the sort of man to kill a man in a passion, and then suffer torment all the rest of his life."

"And you think——" I leaned forward to catch his almost whispered words.

"I think that Frazer Holcombe and only one other person in the world knows the truth about that man that's buried on the old camp-ground where the Cherokee roses grow. He left the neighborhood the next morning, telling father he wanted to examine a new sort of shell for the guns. He's never been back here since. Perhaps he's dead. Father took command of the battery. Things had gone so far then that there was no chance for the little creoles to back out, and father led them into their first fight. They forgot the stain on his name when they had a fighting cock at their head. By George, sir, he laid every Holcombe

that ever lived in the shade that day. It was his first and last fight. His name headed the list of the killed in Holcombe's battery. I was proud of him that day. I'm glad he went just as he did. I didn't feel my own hurt at all. Let's go in and hear Mamie play. You must make her sing for you. There isn't but one other voice in the neighborhood, and that's Miss Matilda Ransom's."

He had got on to his crutches while talking, and we had reached the parlor door just as Miss Ransom's name passed his lips. Miss Maxwell did not move. She simply dropped her hands from the keys into her lap. I thought she looked pallid. But the cool, damp night air might account for that, and I also fancied that she was searching my face to discover, if possible, how much of Frazer Holcombe's story had passed into my keeping. I wondered if that slight, delicate-looking girl could really be carrying about with her a burdensome secret.

"What has my brother been telling you about poor Miss Ransom?" she said, with an effort, as I fancied, at indifference. "She is a splendid woman. As proud as Lucifer, and she doesn't like me at all. I suppose she knows why, and that is all that is necessary. But I do like and pity her. And I pity you, too," she said, "for you have come into a neighborhood where people only sigh and remember instead of hoping and doing."

As I lay awake that night in Mrs. Maxwell's best guest-chamber, the events of the day naturally arranged themselves in a panorama, bringing the dramatic story which Mr. Bud Maxwell had voluntarily imparted as a sequence to the furious tempest that had cast me upon the trader's family for shelter, and I

found myself reasoning abstrusely from cause to effect. How could people liable to such sudden infusions of electricity, subject at all times to such tremendous elemental disturbances, be cool and calculating and equable? I wondered, drowsily, if one could possibly become tempestuous by inoculation, and speculated hazily upon my own chances of becoming a "child of the tropics!"

CHAPTER VII.

A LEAP IN THE DARK.

It must have been because I had been brought so violently into contact with the elements during my first experience of a tropical thunder-storm that the brightness of the succeeding day seemed matchless. I think I never analyzed the sunshine before. The sandy road had been beaten by the rain into a smooth glitter. Crooked Creek had rid itself of its muddy tint, and now sparkled clear over its pebbles. The ferry-flat had been recovered, the ropes had been spliced, and there was no impediment to my return to Montrose.

"I'd say come again if I didn't know you'd only stopped through stress of weather," Maxwell said, holding my hand in a grip that made me wince. "You know we Maxwells don't count for much among the Crooked Creekers, but we'd be glad to see you at any time all the same."

The extreme candor of these people impressed me curiously. They seemed absolutely to have no reserve touching their own social status.

I cordelled myself across the creek that morning, refusing Sam's eager offer of service. Looking back from the opposite bank, I saw the trader's daughter standing in front of the carriage-house, where we had both taken refuge the night before. She was apparently superintending the grooming of a black horse.

She was standing with her back turned towards the creek. I had not seen her at breakfast. I think she wanted me to understand that my accidental entertainment was not to warrant me in considering myself an acquaintance.

"And so you spent the night at the Maxwell's," the business manager said that night, as we smoked our cigars together in the obscurity of the front gallery. "I'll be bound they give you plenty to eat. Those Maxwells always were high livers. It's about all they are fit for." The business manager used the same slighting inflection that Scipio always threw into mention of the trader's family. I felt called on, in view of their recent hospitality, to champion them, so I said:

"You are mistaken. They are fit for a great deal more. I find them kind and courteous. I understand the father and son made good soldiers. They strike me as rather unusual people. Miss Maxwell, in particular, is a very remarkable young woman. She plays the piano superbly, and yet when I came away from there she was superintending the grooming of her own horse. It isn't every girl shows such versatility."

"That must have been Madge Wildfire," said the manager thoughtfully. "Was it a black mare, with a blaze on her face and two white feet?"

I could vouch for the color and the blaze, but had not noticed the feet. "Well, you see, Madge Wildfire is more than a horse to Miss Mary. I've heard folks say if it come to Miss Mary's going hungry or that mare, the mare would get the rations. If Miss Mary had lived up North, where there was newspapers and reporters to spread everything that happened all over

the country, you'd have heard of her; but I tell you, sir, some of the women down here showed the pluck of forty wildcats without a word ever being said about it. I don't include Miss Mary when I fling at the Maxwells. Miss Mary and my sister Julia" (Jule's dead now; he took his cigar from his mouth, and knocked the ash off, while placidly imparting this bit of family history) "took a foolhardy ride up to a Yankee camp once to get back that very horse. Some Feds had stole it. It was a harum-scarum undertaking. Nobody's ever heard Miss Mary tell about it, but Jule used to air it whenever she got a chance. She and Miss Mary were what the women folks call 'bosom friends.' It was about the time Grant was trying to bring Vicksburg to taw by digging that canal on t'other side of the river and leaving her high and dry, which he didn't do by a long shot. They crossed an everlasting sight of troops over the river about fifteen miles above here. The air was blue with stragglers for two or three weeks. Our men were scarce about that time. I was at home and a few other fellows who were trying to raise corn to feed the army on, but that didn't interfere with the Feds' walking in and helping themselves to a saddle horse whenever they found one to their taste.

"One morning Miss Mary sent old Ottaway over to our house early. Ottaway was the father of that boy Sam she keeps tagging after her now. She wrote a note, by Ottaway, saying that the Yankees had been there the day before and taken off Madge Wildfire. Would Jule go with her to see if she could get her back? Jule wrote back word she was just in the humor, as her own little sorrel had been 'yanked.'

But the sorrel wouldn't have been worth going after by itself. Old Ottaway was to go along for protector.

"I was not at the house when the notes were interchanged, or I'd have vetoed the whole proceeding. Not that it would have made any difference, for a man that wasn't in the army those days wasn't presumed to hold any opinions worth expressing. But I was at the house when they made their start, and if I hadn't been so scared for them, I could have got a laugh out of the whole thing, that would have been worth a good deal them days. In place of the sorrel, Jule had rigged up a flea-bitten horse, that had been turned out to die of old age about six months before. She didn't have a bonnet to bless herself with, but a visit to the Yankee General was an event of such importance that she went rummaging in some trunks in the garret, and brought down what they used to call a sky-scraper. I reckon it had been her own great-grandmother's wedding bonnet. When she put that on and got into a riding-skirt made of some blue cottonade, that had been bought for Sunday pants for the hands before the war, she cut a figure. 'It's best not to make yourself captivating on expeditions of that kind,' she said when I guyed her, and I agreed with her. When Miss Mary and old Ottaway rode up they cast Jule in the shade altogether. Miss Mary was riding a fractious little mare with a rope bridle twisted around her head. Old Ottaway's pants and her skirt were cut off the same piece of white stuff woven over there on their plantation. She had a palmetto hat of her own plaiting on her head and Ottaway had a scull-cap she'd made him out of a piece of new carpet. I tell you it

was a stylish cavalcade. But those girls war'n' thinking of the fashions that day. They were mad.

"Jule says she began to think they'd risked too much when they got up on the road beyond Big-a-Plenty. You see the neighborhood was completely stampeded along the line where the army was expected to pass. They passed plantation after plantation where there wasn't a thing to be seen but a lot of darkies lounging around the quarters, or where the stock had it all their own way and could make their dinner off geraniums, or cotton, or tuberoses, just as they fancied. Jule says they had to talk nonsense to keep from crying, it was all so desolate; and they felt nervous, you see, riding along that lonesome road, not exactly sure when they would be plump in the camp, nor how they'd be received when they got there.

"The first intimation they had that they was nearing headquarters was a lot of fresh mounds along the side of the road under the trees. Graves! eleven of them! Nothing but pieces of fence pickets driven in to show head from foot. A name and a number. Jule's horse shied at them, and she says she and Miss Mary stood there looking down on them like Bluebeard's last wife must have looked at the others. They'd got nervous enough by that time to turn around and gallop back home, but just then they saw some live Yankees. Jule says they looked so meek, and took off their hats so polite, that she and Miss Mary felt their courage all coming back strong as ever. They told what their business was, and one of the men offered to conduct them to headquarters, while the others asked the girls if they'd seen any blackberries

on the road. The girls gave them minute directions for finding the blackberries, and then rode right straight on up to the General's tent. Jule says she let Miss Mary do the talking, and it did not take long before an orderly was sent to bring Madge Wildfire and the sorrel to the General's tent.

"Jule used to say she never knew before that day how Mary Maxwell could talk when she had an object to attain, and she didn't know then exactly why Miss Mary talked on and on, even after she'd got on Madge Wildfire's back, asking the General all sorts of questions, looking as innocently into his face as a child. Jule says she thinks the trader's daughter sorter bewitched the old man (Gen. Smith, I think it was) for he stood there leaning on Madge Wildfire's neck, combing her mane out with his fingers, while Miss Mary prattled on as if she didn't care for a thing on earth but the sound of her own voice. Jule says, after they turned their horses' heads away from camp, with old Ottaway leading the horses they'd ridden up there, Miss Mary looked so queer and was so dumb that she didn't know what to make of it. She heard her say, like to herself, you know:

"'Old simpleton! Did he suppose I was talking to entertain him?' But when Jule asked what she had been talking for then, she didn't get any answer. She wouldn't stop when she got back to the house, although it was late, and she must have been almost starved. She wasn't in as high spirits either as a body would have expected her to be, seeing she'd got back the little mare she set so much store by. She looked solemn and anxious and sorter restless. 'What's the *matter with her?*" I asked Jule, when Miss Mary and

old Ottaway rode on up the creek towards her house; and Jule said she hadn't an idea, unless she'd talked herself out at the Yankee camp.

"We was thinking of turning in that night, when the front gate opened, and we could see by the starlight old Ottaway's bright carpet cap and his white pants. He bawled out ahead of him to know if Miss Mary was here? 'Miss Mary!' Jule and I and ma bawled back to him. (Ma's gone, too, now, poor old lady.) Then he told us as well as he could, for want of breath, that she was gone out on Madge Wildfire. Both the Maxwells were away with the battery. The old lady and Miss Mary was all there was at home. Ottaway's story was that she had told her mother she was going to see if they'd given Madge a good supper, and that was the last they'd seen of her. He had a mule out there at the gate, he said, but what chance had he on a mule to ketch up with that child on Madge Wildfire?

"Jule clutched me by the wrist and drew me into the hall. 'Now I know what it means,' she said, all in a tremble from excitement. 'She was asking all those questions for a purpose. She's found out which way that brigade's going to move to-morrow, and she's gone to warn the battery. You know it's camped down at Morgan's Mill. That's what made her so anxious to get away from us.'

"'Morgan's Mill! Why, that's fifteen miles down the river,' I said, thinking Jule had taken leave of her senses, 'and she can't get there at all now, without going around about twenty-five miles. The bridges are all burned, and there's nothing but a freshly thrown-up embankment across Morgan's big ditch on

the old road. Nothing but a lunatic would attempt to cross that on horseback.'

"'Mary Maxwell will do it,' Jule insisted, wringing her hands in fear for her friend. 'She will do it and be killed, unless you can get there before her. The sorrel's just as fast as Madge Wildfire, if you'll ride her with spurs.'

"I must confess when I started off on that ride, between ten and eleven o'clock at night, over a country road that I knew well enough but wasn't 'specially fond of even in broad daylight, I wasn't in a particularly good humor with Miss Mary Maxwell. I thought I should like to advise her mother to put her in a strait-jacket, and keep her in it until the war was over.

"As I didn't know what else to do, I galloped straight for Morgan's Ditch, with a view to intercepting the headstrong girl before she reached the fresh earth-dam. I had taken Jule's advice and put on a pair of Mexican spurs that sent the sorrel over the ground in jumps. I was sorry for the poor little beast. I could feel her sides heaving under my heels, and her breath came in snorts; but if anything happened to Miss Mary, Jule would always reproach me for it. There wasn't a house on the road—not the glimmer of a light. There ought to have been a moon, but it was hiding somewhere in a bank of black clouds that the sorrel couldn't distance. I pulled up once in a while to listen for other hoof-beats than the sorrel's, but it was as still as death on that lonesome road. Sometimes an owl would hoot sleepily, or a dog at a great distance would bark, but no other sound broke the silence for a long time.

Finally, I got down and put my ear to the ground.

If I was on the wrong trail all this time, it would be worse than lost time. The Indian test solved my doubts. I could catch the faint, far-off regular beating of the mare's galloping feet. I leaped back into the saddle and dug the spurs mercilessly in the sorrel's flanks. If it was in horseflesh to overtake that sound, I was bound to do it. A mile beyond the point where I had first caught the sound the road forked. There she would be compelled to decide between the dam or the long ride around. I reached the forks and pulled up again to listen with every nerve strained. I could hear the galloping feet distinctly now; but which fork? I sprang down once more, scratched a match on the inside of my hat, and held it low down to the ground. I was fortunate. In that one second of flickering light I saw the mare's fresh tracks turned in the direction of the dam. I put my foot in the stirrup. The sorrel had grown shy of my spurred boot. She sprang to one side with a snort, and we waltzed around there in the dark for several minutes before I could get back into the saddle. This delay did not improve my temper. When I was once more on her back, I'm afraid I punished her rather severely, but I was beginning to feel an awful responsibility for the neck of that girl who was gaining on me there in the dark. It was too dark to see anything, but I imagined from the distance I had come that the dam could not be very far ahead of me. I was gaining on the sound, and was just about to send my voice ahead of me to warn Miss Mary of the dam, when the sound of the mare's steady gallop over the beaten road changed for one that made me stop with a choking feeling in my

throat. I was too late! She had reached the soft dam.

"I heard just one excited exclamation in a woman's voice, then a scuffling, like the mare had had a hundred feet instead of four. I could hear the beast snorting with fright; then I could hear her scramble on to firm ground on the other side of the ditch. I could hear the empty stirrup strike against the buckles of the girth. She stood still when she got on firm ground, doubtless wondering, just as I did, where was her rider? I almost cursed the darkness that hid that ditch from my sight. I jumped down and tied the sorrel to the first branch I could grab in the dark. I remember thinking I must not leave her loose, for I might have to gallop after help. I ran forward on foot. Just as I got to the dam the moon came sailing out considerately from under that interminable procession of clouds. By its light I could see how the mare had sunk and floundered, and finally plunged her own way out of the fresh piled earth, and by its light I could see Miss Mary lying full length on three saplings that had been flung across the ditch for a clumsy foot-walk before the dam had been thrown up. If the mare hadn't kicked her to death, perhaps she was all right. I called to her in a badly frightened voice. She scrambled to her feet at the sound. 'Is that you, Mr. Cooper?' she called back as tart as green apples. 'If it hadn't been for your frightening me so, I could have made it,' was the first thanks I got. 'How was I to tell it wasn't the Yankees galloping after me all that time? I'm not hurt a bit, and you may as well gallop back home and relieve mother and Jule. Tell mother I'll stay all night at Mrs. Wood's after I've

warned the battery. They were going to try to cross the river to-morrow, and they would have been cut all to pieces. You needn't try to cross the dam. Madge has ploughed it up so you couldn't. I'm all right.'

"She had been making ready for a fresh start while she was talking, and just as the moon sailed out of sight again I saw her leap into the saddle from the top of a stump she had mounted. 'Miss Mary,' I called across the ditch, while she was fumbling for her stirrup, 'why didn't you send me?' 'You might have got hurt,' she called back, with a laugh that cut like a lash, and, sir, I've never had much use for Miss Mary Maxwell since that night. I didn't think I deserved that after all I'd gone through to catch up with her. But she saved that battery. There ain't no two ways about that. Miss Mary always was hard on me.

"Jule asked her the next time she saw her how she managed to get out of such a tight place without so much as a scratch, and she said, when she found the ground was giving way under Madge's feet, she flung herself out of the saddle, expecting to find herself up to the chin in ditch-water the next minute; those three saplings were the most delightful surprise she ever had in her life. She says she made up her mind to stay just where she was until whoever it was galloping after her had taken his leap in the dark."

"Was Frazer Holcombe in command of the battery when Miss Maxwell ran such risks to save it?" I asked, groping for the connecting links between the various recitals I was the receptable for. The answer was perplexing.

"Frazer Holcombe! He'd been dead more'n a

year when Miss Mary took that confounded ride with me in pursuit."

"Then you know that he is dead?"

"Know it? Of course I know it. Why, don't everybody know it!"

This was what I could not answer.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS MAXWELL'S DEPOSITION.

My own inclination and syndicate interests demanded that I should soon call at the Maxwells'. They must not be left to conclude that because chance had domiciled me in the Holcombe house I had become residuary legatee of all the Holcombe pride and prejudice. Moreover, it was necessary that I should extract from Miss Mary Maxwell some definite information, or at least, her personal views concerning the problematical death of Mr. Frazer Holcombe. My interest in that young man was of a purely legitimate commercial kind.

The front doors stand open always in the daytime in that locality. Perhaps they are closed at night, but it is a matter of indifference. Mrs. Maxwell was just crossing the hall with a tray of yeast cakes in her hands when I appeared in the open doorway. She smiled hospitably at me over the yeast cakes.

"My goodness gracious me, Mr. Halsey, I haven't a finger fit to shake hands with you. I've just been making up these yeast cakes, and cornmeal does stick so. That thunderstorm that you and Mamie and me got the benefit of played the wild with everything in the upstairs hall. It's a pity I couldn't be in twenty places at once. Before the war I had one of the best house-girls you ever saw in your life, and she'd 'a' been upstairs and had every window down at the first clap;

and I tell Bud I don't know what he could have been thinking about not to have sent Sam upstairs; but then you don't expect men ever to think of anything useful. Bud's wool-gathering more than half the time—but, my goodness gracious me! here I am keeping you standing all this blessed time as if I was wool-gathering too. Do just step into the parlor and amuse yourself until I can get my hands washed; there ain't a soul in the house but me, but Bud's just a little way off somewhere. I'll blow the horn for him; and Mamie's gone, too, but—oh, well, if Mamie couldn't get away from the house every day, either on Madge Wildfire's back or with her in the shafts, I do really believe she'd take a conniption fit."

I moved on into the parlor, convinced that Mrs. Maxwell would stand there holding that tray of yeast cakes at arm's length till the crack of doom if I did not. She came in presently, pulling down her cuffs over a pair of highly polished wrists. She found me standing transfixed before a profusely ornamented object that occupied all the space in the big open fireplace not appropriated by the masses of feathery asparagus tops which filled and beautified the cavernous space in warm weather.

"I know what you are thinking," said Mrs. Maxwell, with the assurance of a professional mind-reader. "You are thinking that it is the first time you ever saw a mackerel kit used for a parlor ornament, and people must be bad off for fancywork when they can take time to decorate an old tub; but that kit you are looking at 's got a history. If I was sure Mamie wouldn't get back before I told you, I might venture; but my goodness gracious! she does cut a body up so

short if they tried to tell about that mackerel story. It all happened during the war, you see, when everything was giving out, and salt was worth its weight in gold. If it hadn't been for their discovering that Lake Bisteneau, 'way back in Louisiana, people in this country would have died for the want of salt. Lot's wife would have brought a good price about that time if she'd been handy; but after they discovered that the waters of Lake Bisteneau, boiled and evaporated, gave salt, such a pilgrimage as did set in in that direction! Our overseer went with two wagons and all the soap-kettles on the place, and was gone weeks and weeks, but that kit of mackerel was another thing, and hasn't anything to with Lake Bisteneau.

"My mother was alive then—Mamie's grandmother—and Mamie just worshipped the ground she walked on. But, dear me, it's too long to tell you now. There comes Mamie across the creek this very minute. Some of these days maybe she'll tell you herself about the young Yankee captain that helped us through when we went to town to trade off all the old silver and jewelry to get something decent to eat and wear. It was after Vicksburg fell, and we went up on a transport, and if it hadn't been for Mamie, I never would have gotten a thing home; but, well, you've never seen Mamie in one of her 'gales' as I call 'em. If she thought there was anything to be made out of you by talking, she'd talk you to death but what she'd carry her point. Mamie's a queer girl—she is, if she is my own child. I don't know what will become of her when the Big-a-Plenty people move out to Nebraska. She's just turned herself into a regular schoolteacher for those girls. Says they've no other chance. As

long as it amuses her I don't care. Young people must have something to keep them alive. If it wasn't for poor Bud's being a cripple, we'd have sold out too. I wonder whatever became of the captain of that transport? He was a handsome young fellow, and very much of a gentleman too; but, would you believe it? he had the impudence to tell Mamie, before we got off that boat, that if he was alive at the end of the war he was coming to see her. Which, of course, was all talk, for here's the war's been over nearly six years, and no sign of him yet. I reckon he's forgot there ever was such a girl as Mamie Maxwell. I suppose what soldiers and sailors say don't mean anything, anyhow. And I'd think Mamie 'd forgotten about it too, if it wasn't that she keeps that thing as a memento" (this with a sour look at the kit).

"Perhaps Miss Maxwell did not give him sufficient encouragement," I said, looking through the parlor window at the trader's daughter as she came swiftly up the front walk, drawing off her driving-gloves. She was well worth looking at.

"I'm afraid she did," said Mrs. Maxwell, lowering her voice to an anxious undertone. "I've always thought that that Captain Kane, with his big brown eyes and dashing way, took my girl's fancy stronger than any other young fellow. Not that she ever said a word about it; but, my goodness gracious me! wouldn't she be in a way if she heard me running on this way about her affairs? Mamie, come right in the parlor; never mind your hair. Mr. Halsey's got sisters of his own, and he knows a girl can't always look like she'd just come out of a bandbox." Miss Maxwell came in with her hat on, and greeted me with

that cool politeness which made me feel so inexpressibly far away.

"And, Mamie" (Mrs. Maxwell's voice was actually pleading), "do tell Mr. Halsey about that ridiculous trip we took up the river on the Yankee transport, going to Vicksburg to get something to eat, and how the general in command wouldn't give us a permit for one-half the things we had on our list, and how you just made that Captain Kane buy the things himself with the money we sold our old silver and gold for (getting cheated out of half, of course), and how he kept the officers from searching our staterooms, where I'd hidden a bag of coffee—my! but didn't we enjoy that coffee? You'd have enjoyed it too, Mr. Halsey, if you'd been drinking substitutes, okra seed and burnt sweet potatoes—for coffee for two mortal years—and how he landed us at the very nearest point to Crooked Creek at the risk of losing his position, because it was against orders to land a transport except under protection of a gunboat, which, if he hadn't done, we'd have had to pull fifteen miles up the river in a skiff, and the sun blistering hot. I was just trying to explain that mackerel kit to Mr. Halsey, but I havn't got time to do that trip justice, with all the other women getting so mad because their trunks were overhauled and ours wasn't. Mr. Halsey, you mustn't think of such a thing as going away before Bud gets back. I don't know when I've seen him take such a fancy to anybody. I must run away now and leave you. I've got ten thousand things to do at once. Make Mamie tell you about that trip."

She was gone, and I felt as if I had been holding my own breath all that time. Miss Maxwell looked

at me with a demure smile as her mother rustled out of sight with an audible intimation of highly-starched skirts. "Poor mamma is blissfully unconscious that she has told the entire story herself. You must find us awful bores."

During Mrs. Maxwell's breathless monologue I had been planning a *coup de maître.* I believed that this unusual sort of a girl must be approached in an unusual way. Directness in a young man's dealings with a young woman being the most unusual course I could devise, I concluded to be direct.

"Miss Maxwell," I said, ignoring the ornate kit and its attendant avalanche of reminiscences, "I want to obtain some positive information concerning Mr. Frazer Holcombe. I have reason to believe you can furnish me some data to go on. If it is painful for you to give it, I withdraw my request; if not——"

I left my sentence unfinished in sheer astonishment at the effect of my *coup.* The statuesque repose which I had found so tantalizing in this young woman was broken up so suddenly and completely that I was compelled to think she must have maintained it at severe cost. From a burning scarlet that suffused her neck, face, and brow, she suddenly turned pallid. The hands from which she had just drawn her gauntlets were visibly trembling, as I could see from the quivering of the buggy-whip, which she had not yet put away. But with all these signs of agitation I thought a look of relief came into her eyes. I was sure of this when she said: "I have felt ever since I heard that the Holcombe place was about to pass out of the family, that I ought to tell what I do know to some one; but I could not yield it up for food for neighbor-

hood gossip. You will make only legitimate use of it, will you not?"

"Certainly none other," I assured her.

"Come with me then."

She laid the buggy-whip and her gloves on the piano, and walked swiftly out of the front door again, and down the brick walk which led to the yard gate. I followed docilely, morally convinced that I should be fully compensated for any physical exertion she might exact. She did not vochsafe me another word of explanation until she had reached a point in the thick woods that lay between her own home and the Big-a-Plenty plantation, which was so dense with foliage and the rank undergrowth of that region, that twenty yards from the road one is completely out of sight.

"I brought you here," she said, seating herself on a fallen tree, which was made luxurious by mosses and vines, "because it all happened here, and you can best understand my own position by being on the spot, and again, because we are not liable to be overheard. Mother and Bud are not always—discreet."

I fancied that her voice was tremulous when she first began to speak, but then she had been walking very rapidly. It grew firm enough as she went on, and when her cheeks flushed and her eyes glowed with the excitement of the recital, I began to understand why it was that she could sway men when she found it worth her while. She was simply superb, you know, when thoroughly aroused.

"It all happened just here," she said, pushing her hat back so that she could look up at me. "It really does seem impossible to tell anything at all here, intel-

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ligibly, without going back to our war deprivations. You see we tried all sorts of experiments in those days, and if the war had lasted ten years longer, I suppose we should have learned how to make everything out of nothing. Somebody found out how to make claret, so called, out of muscadines. Those are muscadine vines all about your head. Mother concluded she must make the experiment, too, and as time hung dreadfully heavy on my hands, just home from a lively, crowded boarding school, I agreed to gather the muscadines with an army of little darkies to help.

On one of my muscadining expeditions, just here where we are now, I lost a diamond ring father had given me for a birthday gift. It was loose, and I suppose slipped from my finger when I was picking up the muscadines from the ground. I concealed my loss the afternoon it happened, but got up the next morning at the first glimpse of daylight to come up here to look for it. I did not bring any one with me, because I did not care to have my carelessness discovered. I knew I had done nearly all my picking around this old log, so just here I went down on my knees and began hunting for my lost ring. I heard the trampling of feet in the woods almost immediately after I had begun my search. I took it for granted it was some of the hands, perhaps, looking for a mule or a cow. Holcombe's Battery was encamped just across the creek there, opposite our house, in the pasture, that has been called the Battery field ever since. I never thought of connecting the sound of those trampling feet with any of its men—it was too early in the morning, not sun-up yet, you know—until I heard a quick, angry voice; then I knew they were white

men, and I crouched down by the side of this old log, waiting for them to pass on. But they did not pass on. They stopped just over there, perhaps not three yards from me, but completely hidden by the sassafras and the blackberry bushes. I should know better how to act now," she said, glancing up at me with a deprecating look, "but I was such a foolish little thing then, fresh from school, you know, that I just cowered and listened, palsied with fear.

"I heard Mr. Frazer Holcombe's voice first. He had a commanding voice. I had learned that much from hearing him drill the men. 'Now, then,' he said, 'I have taken off my uniform to meet you as man to man. I am not your superior officer, and you are not my subaltern. You are here to retract what you said under the influence of liquor yesterday, when I had put you under arrest, or take the consequences.'

"I am simply giving my deposition to a lawyer," she interrupted her story to say; "what I endured while that altercation was going on has no bearing on the subject." It had no bearing on the subject then, but the memory of it was sufficient to blanch her cheeks as she went on with the deposition.

"I had never heard the voice that answered him so defiantly. I knew from the accent and phraseology, however, that it must be one of the young Creoles of which the battery was principally composed. He told Captain Holcombe that he had nothing to retract; that what he had said under the influence of liquor he repeated then in the soberness of those early morning hours and out there under the canopy of heaven; that he had told the truth when he said that if Frazer Holcombe was where he belonged, he would be tag-

ging around the country in a circus van with his real mother, instead of prancing around on a fine horse as captain of the Holcombe Battery, when he was no more of a Holcombe than—— He did not get any further. Frazer Holcombe roared two words into his face; they were 'liar' and 'fire!'

"Two guns were discharged simultaneously. Then I shrieked, and did what I ought to have done before —rushed towards them. Perhaps, if I had gone sooner, I might have prevented it. Frazer Holcombe was standing like a graven image. He turned his burning eyes on me as if he could have killed me, and I heard him say between his clinched teeth: 'At the mercy of a tattling girl.' That was not just, you know. The other man had staggered backward, and was leaning heavily against a tree. I turned towards him. I wanted to help and didn't know how. 'It is all right, miss,' he said, holding his hands to his side, 'I am quite satisfied. It was agreed between me and the Captain that no word should be spoken that would excite the camp. We are both gentlemen. If I had shot him, it would have been an accident from his own gun. He has shot me; it is an accident from my own gun. Mademoiselle will, I am sure, respect our secret. My Captain, I beg your pardon for unnecessarily telling the truth.'

"He had been growing paler and paler while talking, and now his eyes closed and he sank back in a heap at the foot of the tree. It was then that my senses came to me, and I flew towards our quarters, stopping at the first cabin I came to and ordering the men to go bring the wounded soldier up to the house.

He was by himself in the woods when the men got to him.

"That night Captain Holcombe came to our house to see his wounded subaltern. The doctor at first did not think he was badly hurt. We all thought he would recover. Captain Holcombe asked to see me before he left the house. I went into the parlor and stood up while he said what he had to say. It was the only time I was ever alone with Frazer Holcombe in my life; nevertheless, I am quite aware that Miss Matilda Ransom hates me as rancorously as so sweet and gentle a lady can hate anything. The fact of that interview got afloat, and she has always imagined that when her lover took command of the trader's battery he fell in love with the trader's daughter, and, being too honorable to break with her, fled from the entanglement. Perhaps the time will never come when she will know any better.

"What Frazer Holcombe did say to me was, 'Chance has put you in possession of a very unlikely story concerning myself. I have no right to ask you, for my own sake, to do such violence to your years and sex as never to tell this story, but I do ask you, for the sake of the saintly woman whom I have always called mother, not to make this a matter of neighborhood gossip. I shall leave for New Orleans to-morrow, to sift this matter to the bottom, and, if it takes a lifetime and carries me around the world, I shall get at the truth before I come back.'

"He did go away the next day," she added, rising slowly from the tree, "and two weeks later the wounded man died. Now you know all that I know."

"One thing more," I said eagerly. "I want to know what you said to Frazer Holcombe, when he made that request of you in such an insolent fashion."

"What did I say to him?" She raised her head with the majesty of an empress. "I told him that whether his search took an hour or a lifetime, whether it carried him around the world or only safely back to his true mother at Montrose, in spite of my years and sex he should never suffer at the hands of a tattling girl, unless a time should come when it seemed to me a duty to speak. I thought that time had come when I heard that Miss Nannie Holcombe's husband was going to sell the old place, when, perhaps—you know, only perhaps—the rightful heir might still be alive. I should be glad to have him come back for Miss Matilda's sake."

The smile with which the trader's daughter said this was simply seraphic. I think she liked me better after that talk.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE MERCY OF A GUNBOAT.

THE old plantation was preparing for that brief period of activity that comes in autumn, imparting a temporary urgency to the sluggish current of life on a cotton place. The nodding plumes of the golden-rod lay crushed and defiled all along the route of the heavy wains that housed the gathered cotton. The crows circled and cawed clamorously about the tops of the pecans, whose rich nuts fell in pattering showers on the dead leaves, where, from early dawn until dewy night, an army of sparsely clad, active-limbed little darkies, contended for them with the "razor-backs," that root for a living the year round. The frost-sweetened persimmons dropped from their loosened stems and lay in sugary masses in every woodland hollow. The polished green of the pawpaw turned to a marrowy yellow. The poisoned ivy flushed redly in baleful beauty as it clasped the forest trees. The flowering shrubs on the terraces, shed their foliage and cast twiggy shadows on the bronzed grass; only the arbor-vitæs and the japonicas held fast by their ever-greenness. Soft white puffs of steam escaped from the short black pipe projecting from the shingle roof of the gin-house, to lose themselves among their fellow-clouds in the blue sky above. It was ginning time.

"No mo' tromps frew de woods, son; I'se got t' go to work," said Scipio, entering my bedroom one night

without the ceremony of knocking, an omission I had grown reconciled to, seeing he always came in on those chilly autumn evenings with as many sticks of white-ash wood as he could clasp in his two brawny arms. One point of etiquette was rigidly observed by my self-constituted attendant: Scipio would never advance beyond the threshold with his head covered. If he had no disengaged hand with which to remove his disreputable old tile, he would give his head a vigorous shake to dislodge it, and leave it wherever it might chance to fall, until he was ready to take his departure again. This he was never in a hurry to do, and I believe some of the happiest hours of the old man's latter days were those he spent sitting on those sticks of ash wood, after he had corded them neatly in one corner of my cavernous fireplace, maundering on about old times as he blackened my shoes, and I smoked and idly stared into the dancing blaze of the wood-fire, which was such a luxurious novelty to me. I used often to think pityingly of mother and the girls extracting their winter supply of comfort through the uncheerful medium of a black register up there in Boston.

I was writing on the particular evening I mention—writing to the husband of that Miss Nannie Holcombe who had been expressing some very pardonable impatience at the delay of the syndicate in concluding its purchase of Montrose. To my demand for positive information concerning the death of another claimant to the property, Mr. Frazer Holcombe, the answer had come back that there could be no greater doubt about Mr. Frazer Holcombe's death than about his brother Spencer's, as they had both died during the

war; that I could obtain as full particulars as could be given of any event that had occurred at that unsettled period from an old man named Scipio, "if still alive," who had accompanied the late Mrs. Holcombe when she went to the seat of war to see her two wounded sons, only to find them both dead.

I wondered, on reading this letter, why Scipio should not have confided the story of his pilgrimage to me, when it had been his delight, seemingly, to tell me all that he could recall. When I asked him about it, the old man bowed his head for a second on his horny hands, and then, looking away from me into the dancing flames before which we were both sitting, he said very gently:

"Thar's some things that it hu'ts so bad to call t' min', son, that folks would rather furgit 'em. W'en I thinks uv ol' Miss as undertakin' that trip, w'en she was bowed down wid sorrer, an' uv all she hed t' stan' befo' I got her back home ag'in, seems lak it went too deep t' mak' a story out'n it; not but w'at you am welcome to it, if any good's t' come of tellin' it."

When I told the old man that the place could not be sold until positive proof of the oldest son's death could be obtained, I thought his dim eyes glowed with satisfaction. I reminded him that night of his expressed intention to do Mr. Frazer Holcombe justice "if the skies fell," but gave him no reason to suppose that I was already in possession of a portion of his history.

"Now's ez good a time as any," said Scipio, rising to interpose his folded jacket between him and the ash-wood, modestly declining my repeated proffer of a chair. "You see, son, Mars Frazer warn' a Hol-

combe 't all. No, sir, he wuz a Frazer—de onlies' son of ol' Miss's onlies' brother. But nobody in this region ain' never heerd anything 'bout that. I 'low me an Anarky's the onlies' folks 'bove groun' now that does know it.

"Ol' Miss en Colonel Holcombe, my master, had been married goin' on fo' years an' didn't have no chile yit. My w'ite folks wuz gre't hands t' travil. Dey never miss goin' to Orleans to Mardi Gras, en dey never miss takin' me en Anarky 'long—Anarky t' wait on ol' Miss, en me to look arter de baggidge en such. We always stop at de ol' Sain' Charles, w'en we alls went t' de city. Nuthin' but de bes' wurn' good 'nough for our w'ite folks. En w'en Colonel Holcombe call for rooms, you bet dey open der bes'!

"Well, sir, it was on one er them trips that we was all 'stonish' mightily. Ol' Miss en de Colonel, dey hed gone to the theatre (my w'ite folks wuz in fur all that was goin'), en Anarky, she wus foldin' up Miss's dresses, a-packin' her trunks (Miss had a sight on 'em, too), en I wuz brushin' ol' Mars's clothes for Anarky to put in his trunks (we wuz gwine to start home the ve'y nex' day), w'en a knock come t' de do', en we jes' call out 'Come in,' 'sposin' 't were some uv de hotel folks, you see.

"Well, sir, de do' open, en in walk a young gentleman wid a bundle in he's arm. I wus fur axin' him w'at he want, straight up en down; but Anarky, she jus' flied at him, en begun muchin' him, callin' him her dear Mars Wallie and a goin' on. You see, Anarky she b'longed to de Frazers, en she knowed 'em all from a to zed. En', sir, while she wuz goin' on' that

bundle begin to squirm en a cry comes from the inside er it.

"Mars Wallie, he jus' hol' it out, sorter helpless like, to Anarky, en' say, 'Anarky tek my baby. It hasn't got any mother. I'll wait here until sister gets back. I just heard to-day she was in town.' It warn' fur me nor Anarky to ask no questions. Anarky, she took the bundle and went back into the room where she'd been packing ol' Miss's trunks. I went on brushin' ol' Mars's clothes. Mister Wallie, he just set there like he didn' have no mo' life in 'm than a block er wood, 'till the folks got back f'um de play, en den me en Anarky was tol' we could go.

"Somethin' made a change in the Colonel's plans. 'Stidder goin' back to de plantation nex' day, as he p'intedly said he gwine do, he tell me he gwine send me back, but dat I hafter mek up my min' t' do widout Anarky a little while. Furdermore, he p'intedly tell me t' keep my mouf shet about Mister Wallie. He say ol' Miss en him 'clude to go to Eur'p' befo' dey come back home.

"Well, sir, dey went, en dey trav'l 'bout or stay somewhar' mo'n two years. It was on dat trip dey bought mos' all de pictures en de big baptizin' bowl down yon' in de chapel. De fus' thing ol' Miss done after gettin' back wuz to have her son Frazer Holcombe baptize in dat bowl. An' it were a christenin', dat was a christenin', I tell you. Mars Frazer wuz mos' six years old when Mars Spence were born.

"I think it sorter made ol' Mars feel different to him, but he never showed it much. And as fur ol' Miss—well, sir, ol' Miss were jus' a nateral-born saint; an' she had tooken Mars Wallie's child when she

didn't have none of her own, an' befo' her own come she'd jus' got wrap up in him, dat's all. An' he were a fine young fellow, no two ways 'bout it. Mars Spence, he jus' 'dore de groun' he's buddy Fraze walk on. Dat's w'at mek me say w'at I does say. Ef Mars Fraze is 'bove groun', nobody ain't got no better right to be at the head of dis place den him. Ef ol' Miss lef' a will, I lay you'll fin' her son Fraze Holcombe's name big. You see, he worn' no po' folks' son. Mister Wallie had money uv his own."

"But you've never told me yet, Scipio, why you find it so hard to believe he is dead, and here" (touching the open letter on my desk) "your Miss Nannie's husband says you went to the spot where both the Holcombe boys died."

"I know. I know. That's what all the white folks thinks. Yes, I think I is tol' you why I misdoubts that Mars Fraze is daid. Dey all comes back t' me, son, one time or 'nuther, all but Mars Fraze. De Master may call me soon, son, one shill be taken en t'other lef'. It will be lonesome lak for Anarky, down at de cabin, if he calls me fus', but 'less'n Mars Fraze speaks to me some way or 'nuther, in de daytime, or w'en de stars is shinin', lak all de res' ov my w'ite folks does, I'll mentain he ain' cross over. Dey all comes back t' me, son." Then, in more wide-awake tones, "Read me w'at Miss Nannie's husband say. He's mouty anxious to get rid ov de ol' place, I knows dat much."

I read the paragraph concerning himself.

"Dat's so. I ain' gwine deny that Scip went wid ol' Miss t' de seat uv war, en a time we hed gittin' thar'. En I ain' gwine to deny that these ol' eyes of mine

look down on Mars Spence's face, white and cold, and knowed it for my own dear chile, but Mars Fraze—that's anudder thing."

I did not ply him with questions. I knew, from the rapt look in his eyes, that old Scipio was already eagerly turning the wheel backward, and would do it far more satisfactorily if he could forget my very presence. He looked like a withered old seer, sitting there before my bright fire, with his gnarled hands clasped about his knees.

"I disremember egzackly whe'r I wuz ploughin' my co'n in de long south fiel' dat day, er a throwin' dirt on t' my cott'n, but I knows I had my critter wid me doin' somethin', w'en Miss Nannie she come lopin' down from de big house on her black pony, wid her face es w'ite es a tablecloth. Now, I come t' think uv it, it was hoein' co'n I wuz at; for I recollec' how dat awdashus little pony er hern chawed off de blades er co'n, wid me not keerin', nor noticin', I wuz dat full er w'at she had to say. A soldier had come 'long, gwine home on p'role, ben a prisoner, en hed t' git 'cross the river de bes' way he could. He brought news that Mars Spence was sick er hu't—one, he warn' quite clar' which—en wuz layin' in hospertal over yonder 'bout Shrevespo't. Mars Spence he were wid our folks in what they call the trans—trans——"

"Trans-Mississippi Department," I suggested.

"Egzackly. En the soldier say Mars Fraze, he there too, but whe'r he were sick or well was mo'n he were prepared to say. You see, son, we couldn' git no letters backerds ner forerds in dem times. It was mighty tryin' to our w'ite folks. No letters, no papers, no nothin'. It was real drearisome en no mistake. It

made folks heartsick, for true. Well, sir, w'en dat word 'bout her boys reach ol' Miss, ther warn' no holdin' her. She sent Miss Nannie lopin' down for me t' come up t' de big house. Ol' Miss didn't never have to send for Scip twice't. I hed my critter out'n de plough en was clatterin' back to de big house 'longside er Miss Nannie by de time she fa'rly got de las' word out. Ol' Miss, she say, jes' es easy es if she were orderin' de carriage 'roun' frum de carriage-house: 'Scip, I want you to get me across the river. I'm going to my boys.'

"I looks at ol' Miss, 'stonish'. You see, son, thar warn' no steamboats in the river in them days. Lees' ways, none er ourn. Thar' was gunboats, but dey warn' gwine lan' en pick me en ol' Miss up en drap us on t'other side. En thar' was what dey call de transpo'ts, but dey just went scootin' up de river, from Orleans to Vicksburg, totin' soldiers; dey warn' gwine lan' to 'commodate ol' Miss. Thar' warn' but one way t' git crost dat river, en dat wuz to watch yo' chance en slip crost in a skift w'en de gunboat was out of sight roun' some uv de bends. But den you lan' right smack in de woods on yuther sho', en w'at I gwine do wid ol' Miss arter I git her over on yuther sho'? Dat's w'at I wanted t' know. Whilst I was thinkin' all that, fas' as chain lightnin', ol' Miss wuz mekin' up her min' too.

"We had a fus'-rate yawl in the crick then. We kep' one there fur carrying feed over t' de stock w'en we turn 'em in de fur pasture. I wuz thinkin' 'bout that ve'y boat w'en ol' Miss speak ag'in. En w'at you 'spose her orders was? I was to tek a fo'-mule wagon an' put that skift on it. I wuz to haul it out to the

river and put it into the water somewhere whar' the bushes would hide it from the gunboat. Den I wuz to stay thar' until she come 'long in de carryall. 'We mus' get 'way before sunrise to-morrow morning, Scip,' she said, twisting her hands together like it hu't her to think of them boys so far off, en such a slow way of gittin' to them.

"'But how 'bout w'en we git on yuther side, Miss?' I venture to ax, fur you see I was thinkin' trouble mebbe hed onsettle her min', en she wur'n' calculatin' that fur ahead. 'I am going to cross the carryall and the mules,' she said, just as soft and easy as if crossing a carryall and swimmin' two mules 'crost the Mississippi River, wid a gunboat ready to nab you, was es simple es rockin' in a easy-cheer in her own parlor.

"I look at ol' Miss 'stonish'. I wuz 'bout t' tell her she'd better let me go by myse'f to see 'bout de boys, w'en she look at me sorter freezin' lak, en say, 'If you are afraid to go with me, Scipio, just say so, and I will take another one of the boys.' Dat cut me, son, it did, fur true. Ol' Miss oughtn' to said dem words t' ol' Scip. I answer back: 'I ain' skeered to go nowhars, Miss, fur you; but I is skeered to have you start out on such a undertakin'.' Den ol' Miss she put her han' in mine, en say soft lak, 'I beg your pardon, Scip, but I must go, and the sooner you help me off the better. There! no use saying another word.'

"Thar' warn' much sleep for Scip that night. Thar' was Anarky frettin' 'cause she 'lowed I wuz gwine right smack into de lion's den, lak Dan'el done, en yet she wuz fur puttin' up ev'y blessed stitch uv clothes I hed in the worl' fur me to tek 'long. Thar' was Sandy a greasin' up the old carryall and a pomperin' de mules

which we was gwine to swim 'cross de river nex' mawnin'. Thar' was Betsy in de kitchen, cookin' 'nough vittles t' las' us tell kingdom come, en thar' was me, feelin' the whole 'sponsibility uv ev'ything a restin' on my sholdas. Sandy was to drive ol' Miss to de river bank, en I was to go ahead wid de yawl en git her in de water by de time day 'rive. I kep' my sheer uv de contrac', en she was a-dancin' up and down in de water, wid de fus' streak er sunshine bringing her white an' green paint out lively, w'en de carryall roll up so soft lak dat it was mos' on us befo' we yhere it. You see Sandy give dat carryall a fus'-class greasin' de night befo'. Den we jus' hustle roun' thar', fur you see thar' warn' a thing in sight all along dat stretch uv the river. It look as lonesome an' still out thar' on the water es if that river hed ben de fus' thing made in de worl', en thar' warn' no folks made yit to use it. The gunboat couldn't be ev'ywhar' at oncet, and es she hed a stretch of twenty miles to paterole, we 'lowed, Sandy and me, dat we might possubly git ol' Miss en de carryall over before she come roun' de bend again. Sandy was to go 'long to row de yawl back home. 'Sides dat, thar' was de two mules t' swim acrost. My heart sho'ly did beat fas' w'en ol' Miss step down out'n dat carryall, lookin' so w'ite, but wid her face set, and said, 'Now, boys, don't waste a minute.' Thar' warn' never no back-out in any of our w'ite folks.

"Well, sirs, the sun was turnin' the tops of the water willows to gold feathers, and a long-legged white crane was just steppin' into de water to hunt for he's breakfus', w'en we push dat yawl off from dis side, me and Sandy, and pulled fur all we wuz wu'th. The

carryali was in de yawl, all took to pieces. Ol' Miss was settin' in de stern wid de bridle uv one uv de mules holt in bofe her little hands; all she had t' do wuz hold he's head up out'n de water. Floy, Sandy's boy, was settin' by her, grippin' t' yuther mule's bridle. Ol' Miss's eyes look big and solemn, comin' out'n her black bonnet (Marse die in '60). I ain' sho' Miss didn' say a pra'r jus' es me en Sandy dip our oa's in de water, but me en him wasn't jus' egzactly 'pendin' on ol' Miss's pra'rs to git us crost de river dat day. We was 'pendin' principally upon pullin' togedder. En, sir, we did pull, I tell you. Dat river look forty miles wide dat day. W'en we start out, Sandy he struck up a song for us t' keep time to wid de oa's, but it seemed lak' he warn' in good chune dat mawnin', fur his song sorter die 'way, lak it was sick. Son, ef I lives to be a fousan' year ol', I ain't gwine never forgit how loud dem oa's soun' dat day. You see we done forgit to muffle de oa'locks. It wus so still out thar', wid the sunlight creeping up over the willows, and the cranes a-stepping 'long the edge of the sandbar, like the worl' was made for them, that I reckon I got narvous. But I pulled. Yes, sir; I never let up on dem oa's—ontel, well, de col' shivers did go down my back den.

"Floy, Sandy's boy, he speak up sorter choky lak, en say, 'Daddy, look dar.' He nod his haid down to'ds de bend—bofe he's hands was busy wid dat mule's bridle. We all looked. Thar' it was!—a long black streamer of smoke curling 'long the tops of the trees lak a big black snake. Den we knowed de gunboat was a mekin' fur us.

"'Pull, boys!'

"Ol' Miss said it; but she needn't 'a'. We was

pullin' lak we had ten pair hands stidder two. We wuz jus' 'bout midway uv de river. It look lak dar was twenty miles uv water on each side dat yawl, en it didn't mek a bit uv diffunce which way we pulled. We just pull straight fur whar' we wanted t' go. Thar she come—a great, big, black, hulky thing, that could 'a' swallered us up en not know she'd took anything. I didn't feel uv no mo' 'portance in dis worl' just den dan a mouse in a trap. Jus' 'bout dat time I 'gin t' wish ol' Miss's pra'rs mout hev some force.

"Sandy en me bent to dem oa's till it's a land's wonder we didn't crack our spines in two. Ol' Miss she jus' sot wid her eyes fix on dat black hulk, en Floy, well, he tuk it out in bellerin.' Presently, sir—pop—bang! Fus' we see de w'ite puff, den we yhere de shell jes' a-whistlin' along de water. Ol' Miss tuk out her w'ite handkerchuf an' wave it. De gunboat was too fur off fur us to see de folks on it. I reckon dey mus' hev hed a glass. Leastways, she act very cu'ous. Ol' Miss handkerchuf waz still a wavin' an' we was all a-wonderin' whar' de nex' shell would hit, furst one jus' did fall short uv de skift, w'en a secon' one come spinnin'. Dis one fell mos' on de sho' we hed started out from, an' den, sir, ef you bleeve me, dat gunboat crope 'round de corner uv dat bend once mo', an' we didn't see nothin' but smoke while we pulled fur de sho'."

"What do you suppose that meant?" I asked, as Scipio stopped to bring together the ends of a stick of wood that had burned in two while he had been talking.

"I ain' never quite med up my min'," he said thoughtfully, "whe'r de folks on dat boat, seein' a

woman in black, sorter guessed at her erran' an' 'cluded to let her 'lone, or whe'r ol' Miss's pra'rs hed anythin' t' do wid it. I allers thought arter dat, dat de gunboat's bark was wuss den its bite."

"I suppose it was smooth travelling after you got across the river?"

"Smooth trav'ling!" Scipio looked at me contemptuously. "Thar' warn' smoot nuthin' them days. I'se jus' tol' you how ol' Miss en me *started*."

CHAPTER X.

SCIPIO BURNS A BBIDGE.

IT was with unconscious eloquence that Scipio told the story of how he took ol' Miss to the Yankee camp and back, and it is because the pathos of it lay in the truth of it, that I desire once more to repudiate the charge of being a fictionmonger. I wrote it home because I wanted my Northern sisters to bestow their belated meed of sympathy upon their Southern sisters, to whom was given ashes for beauty and mourning for the oil of joy.

When I had ventured to remark that I supposed it had been smooth travelling after the Federal gunboat had leniently "blinked" the passage of a blackclad pilgrim across its watery territory, Scipio looked at me curiously, as if he found the depths of my ignorance absolutely unfathomable, and answered in that vein of harmless satire which he frequently lapsed into:

"Oh! ve'y smoove travellin', ve'y smoove indeed; mos' speshully dat night w'en we stop at a house full er gorillers, en ol' Miss she dat skeered uv 'em dat nuthin' wouldn' do but Scip mus' fetch in de kerridge afgh'n en mek down he's bed befo' de fire in her room. Ol' Miss know" (and here Scipio's dull eyes glowed with the pride of recollection, and he straightened himself to the utmost capacity of his bent spine), "dat

seventy times seven gorillers couldn' pester her w'ilst Scip wuz 'bout. Thar wuz jes' seven uv 'em."

I found it somewhat puzzling at first to comprehend how Scipio could have defied seven gorillas successfully, but understood better when the seven gorillas of his narrative resolved themselves into seven of the guerillas who, under pretence of patriotic devotion, shirked regular military enlistment, and proved themselves a bane to their own side.

"I tell you, suh, dem bushwhackers thought a long sight mo' er theyseffs den our w'ite folks thought er dem. You yhere dem talk, you'd think dat Marse Lee, en Beaur'gar', en Jackson, en de res' er 'em, wuz all jus' foolin' 'way de time, en de bushwhackers wuz doin' all de whuppin'. En, arter all, all dey done wuz t' gallop out t' de river oncet awhile, bang 'way at a transpo't, skeer de solgers on her gyards a little; den gallop back t' eat de folks at home out'n all dey could rake en scrape togedder. Dat wuz de sort uv solgers me en Miss come up wid on dat trip. W'en dey warn' bangin' 'way at de transpo'ts, dey wuz principully 'gaged in w'at dey call reg'latin' de country. But, suh, it wuz cu'ious sort er reg'latin' dey done. Dey done it mos'ly uv dark nights, en whar houses warn' ve'y thick. I ain' never had no use fur gorillers sence dat trip."

To be guided by Scip's emphasis of disgust, one would have inferred that before that trip guerillas had been an article of daily and necessary consumption with him. But it was not of his grotesque personality nor of his meagre philological attainments I was thinking that evening, as our four feet, poised on their heels, rested in friendly juxtaposition on the brick hearth in front of the flaming, crackling wood fire that

made the autumn evenings at Montrose such a luxury. I had crossed the swift rushing river with him in fancy, and with the stately sorrowful lady, bent on her dreary errand, I clambered up the sandy banks with that feeble crew after the other shore was gained, and took my part in the eager haste with which they put the disjointed carryall together again, and harnessed the dripping, panting mules to its pole. I knew exactly what Scipio had felt when the mistress was finally ensconced safely in the back seat, with that superfluity of provisions, prepared by the Montrose cook, in a basket under her feet, and the other boys had turned back, leaving him to take entire charge of this forlorn expedition.

"I tell you, son, I felt lak de Lawd had laid a big slice uv de yearth on my shoulders, en tol me t' tek keer uv it by my lone seff. You see, I didn't jus' egzackly know which way t' turn fus. All I was sho' 'bout wuz dat Mars Spence were hu't en in hospital, en 'at I got t' git ol' Miss t' him. Thar wuz just a weed-choke wagin-road leadin' up from de cotton woods on de bank, whar de folks hed be'n use t' come fur poles t' mek pens wid, but it showed mighty faint dat mawnin'. You see, folks didn' have de pick uv crossin' them days; dey hed t' slip crost de river jus' whar en when dey could. En we'd come up in a thicket. Thar warn' a blessed critter in sight, but only one po' ol' muly cow, en she lif' her head en stood thar chewin' on her cud like she was 'stonish' t' see us, en a red-hammer peckin' 'way fur he's brekfus' on a rotten stump look at us sorter sassy. Them's all the livin' things I see; but, son, I 'lows de good Lawd *mus'* 'a' sent one o' his angels long t' tek keer o' ol'

Miss on dat trip, only we couldn' see him. Scip don' want t' tek all the credit to hisseff."

I followed the toiling mules as they dragged the light vehicle, with its slender load, up through the heavy sands of the river banks where the slender poles of the young cotton-woods stood in ranks on either side. I went with them along the monotonous country road, where was nothing but forsaken cotton places, whose owners had retreated precipitately before the advance of an invading army. I stopped with them under the shade of a branching sycamore tree when the heat and burden of the day was upon them, and watched faithful old Scipio as he kindled a fire of sticks over which to heat his mistress's coffee, while the mules were taking their noonday rest and meal. I laughed with him when they came to the little muddy stream that he was afraid to venture to ford with his precious freight and so waited with stolid patience for other wayfarers, and was made to feel exceeding small by a pig which advanced boldly into the shallow bayou, whose waters covered his knees only. I shared his anxiety when that long first day wore itself out and the shades of night came creeping along the woodland road, with no stopping-place in sight. "I could keep ol' Miss from hungerin' en thirstin' right out thar in the open road, but how I gwine fin' a bed fur her?" he asked, spreading his hands questioningly. "Dat was w't wuz pesterin' me. Seem lak de sun never wuz in sech a big hurry t' go down befo', en dark jus' drap down lak a black kyurtin'. Miss, ev'ry now en den, she'd lean forerd en say somethin' sorter 'couragin' lak t' comfort me, but I knowed how much dat wuz wuth, en it did seem

lak dat slice uv de yearth dat de Lawd lay on me w'en we start growed heavier wid every turn uv dem carryall wheels, or mebbe, de angel turn back fur somethin' jus' 'bout den. I jus' kep' straight long, 'cause thar warn' nuthin' else to do, you see.

"It was Miss dat fus ketch de lowin' uv de cows en de bleatin' uv de calves by which we knowed folks mus' be clost at han' somewhar, and presen'ly I see a lantern settin' on a stump, 'longside uv some milk-piggins, en I jus' up en hollers, 'Hello, de house!' "

I stopped with the carryall in front of a dimly lighted, low-roofed house, which Scip described scornfully as "mouty little better" than the Montrose cabins, and shared his disgust for the rough sojourning-place that fate had assigned the fastidious mistress of the Holcombe house. He pictured the inmates of the establishment who came trooping into view at sound of that stentorian halloo so graphically that I saw them too. There were women, men, and dogs, all on the alert to know who demanded entertainment. The mistress of the house, with a dripping tallow candle held high over her head, came first, and about her a group of roughly clad men in flannel shirts, with black holsters belted about their waists, and long top-boots prominently in view, stood awaiting developments. To Scipio's demands for a night's lodging came back the inquiry:

"How many?"

"Ol' Miss she lean forrerd," said Scip, "en s'vey de crowd on dat gall'ry, un den sorter whisper me to ax how fur to de nex' stoppin'-place, en w'en de answer came back, 'fo' miles,' ol' Miss she sorter sigh en say,

'we mus' stop here, Scipio; it can't be helped'; en, suh, we stop."

I knew just what the old man felt when he saw his mistress sitting by the same hearth with a lot of evil-looking rough-rangers, in the only sitting-room of the house, where the firelight played impartially now on the men's rude unshaven faces, now on the lady's pure patrician features.

"I knowed den," said Scipio, "what pearls befo' swine meant. You see, folks hed t' be mighty savin' them days, en the woman wid de candle hed gone back to git supper ready. Ol' Miss she jus' set thar, with her face lookin' so w'ite en her big eyes fix on de flames, en de gorillers, arter dey done tuk off der caps en laid der co'n-cob pipes on de chimbley-piece, outer respec' fur her, sot thar too, mighty subdued lak. I didn' like t' leave ol' Miss, but I'ze bleeged t' 'tend to my mules, en so I pile up her shawls en things in one cornder en went back to the carryall.

"Thar warn' much to do but give 'em a good feed right out thar whar I'd tethered them clost to the carryall, whar I 'lowed to sleep dat night, en I jus' clomb up in the carryall en grope 'bout in de dark t' feel ef I overlook anything Miss mout want in de night. Well, sir, whilst I was in dat carryall I yhere voices, en I lay low, fur dem wuz mouty cu'ous times, en folks couldn' jis egzackly speak der min' always. I yhere two voices, en I yhere footsteps, en I knowed somebody wuz walking roun' my mules." It was with a ring of revived excitement that Scipio told how he discovered that the men who were walking around his mules and discussing their good points finally concluded that when he made a start in the morning he

must do it with another pair of animals, as they needed his for the service; and how they also determined to demand a little money from the "old lady" for campaign funds, salving their consciences by the affirmation that it was for the protection of her life and property that they were leading their "dog's lives."

"Well, sir, by de time them gorillers had done settle w'at they wuz gwine do wid my mules en ol' Miss' pocketbook, en de ho'n done blow fur 'em t' come in t' supper, I wuz dat weak on my knees dat I wuz all of a trimble w'en I clum down out'n de carryall, en went back to de house. W'en I git thar, I see ol' Miss settin' at de table wid dem raskilly swine. Miss wurn' neva one er yo' outsettin' sort. She didn' want no supper, but she didn' want them folks to think she wuz too good to set down t' de table wid 'em, so thar she wuz. En sech a supper. Sassafras tea, sweet'n' wid sorghum molasses, an' co'n bread, fur ol' Miss!

"But Miss warn' thinking nor keerin' w'at she ate; she wuz thinkin' uv them boys er hern in camp. I could tell it by the fur-away look in her eyes. Ol' Miss she lef' de table fus, en w'en she foun' me in the settin'-room, she comed clost up t' me en say, sorter easy: 'Scipio, I think I'd rather you'd make your pallet down in my room. There's rather a rough-looking set here.' Then, suh, I wuz in a pucker. I hed 'low to watch my mules dat night, but ol' Miss's wud wuz law."

He pictured for me the poor, bare bedchamber off the sitting-room, where his beloved mistress lay on a coarse, hard lounge, sleeping away the fatigue of the day, while he, oppressed with his awful sense of re-

sponsibility, slumbered uneasily at her feet. I could see the firelight glancing through the loosely chinked logs of the partition wall, on the other side of which, far into the night, the rude sound of rattling dice and shuffling cards told how the independent patriots disposed of their leisure hours.

"W'en ev'ything is right," said Scipio, "I kin sleep so you mout fire a cannon inter bofe my ears widout discommodin' me; but I'd hit on a plan t' git ahead uv dem raskilly gorillers, en it would a cos' too much fur me t' oversleep myseff dat night. W'en I made my pallit down, I ax ol' Miss wus she willin' t' mek a daylight start in de mawnin'. She say de sooner de better, en es she done pay fur her lodgin' en supper befo'han', der warn' nuthin' to hinder.

"Well, sir, all I wus waitin' fur wuz fur them gorillers to go t' bed. Seem lak dey wuz mekin' a night uv it. But dey went at las'. I yhere 'm trompin' up stairs lak so many mules. Es soon as I wuz sho' uv 'm, I slips out en toddles todes de stable. By de time I git back to ol' Miss' room, der warn' a hoof er cattle inside dat lot but my two mules. Den, sir, wid de fus' streak uv light, I clar out again en harniss up. I tell you, I dun my work dat mawnin' wid my heart in my mouf. It wuz neck er nothin' now. Ef I warn' out er reach er dem reg'lators befo' dey foun' out der critters wuz all loose, well, den—look out, dat wuz all. Ol' Miss she seem as oneasy as I wuz, aldoa I ain' never let on, en w'en I git back t' de house she wus all ready fur a start. We stole out lak we wuz carryin' 'way somethin' that didn' b'long to us. A dog come runnin' rou' de cornder uv de house en set up a growl, but I flinged a piece a chicken out'n de baskit at him,

en he grabbed it and made off. Some geese that wuz squattin' roun' in de yard, set up a rackit nex', but I wuz ready for dem, too, wid a handful uv co'n. I think de Lawd mus' a ho'p us t' git 'way widout anybody wakin' up, and w'en we turned our back on dat house, a col' wet fog was layin' all over it like a thick white sheet, en purty soon you couldn't see no more uv it.

"Mebbe I didn't mek them mules travel that mawnin'. Ol' Miss she say, 'Scipio, do you think it best to make them go so very fast?' En I answer back, 'It's cool now, Miss, en I want to git all I kin out uv 'em whilst they's fresh.' Dat's all she knowed." I shared with my old Scip the anxious excitement of that early morning drive, when the trees dropped dew like rain upon them when the carryall brushed their branches. I quite shared in the incendiary impulse that impelled him to spring from the carryall and seize a brand from the burning log which he described finding just before he reached a wooden bridge over a narrow bayou.

"I hope de Lawd may forgive me all de lies them gorillers made me tell," he said devoutly, "but w'en I saw dem burning logs I could 'a' shout for joy. I jus' jump clean out'n de carryall, en say t' ol' Miss, I mus' git a chunk er fire to warm our brekfus' wid w'en we gits on de udder side dat bridge. (Somebody had be'n campin' thar en lef a fire burnin'.) Well, sir, I got a real lively chunk en clumb back in de wagon in a hurry. I hol' it out fur wid one han' while I drive 'crost dat bridge wid de udder. Ol' Miss she say, 'Be careful, Scip, or you might drop a spark on the bridge.'

En I say, 'Yessum,' but I laffs to myseff, fur you see dat's jus' w'at I wuz aimin' to do.

"Well, sir, w'en we wuz on de right side er dat bridge I driv on a little way furder en den stop. It waz time I wuz givin' ol' Miss some brekfus' en lettin' my mules blow. 'Sides, I didn' want to get out er sight er dat bridge, befo' I made sho'. It warn't long befo' we had a fus'-class bonfire in dat neighborhood. Ol' Miss she wuz real disturbed 'bout it; but I say it were a ramshackle ol' bridge ennyhow, Miss, en now de folks will build a new one. Mebbe we save some folks from gittin' drowned at dat ve'y spot.

"I wuz better satisfied to move on arter I wuz sho' them gorillers could n't cross on dat bridge, so I turned aside under some shade trees an' fix ol' Miss a fus'-class breakfus' by he holp uv dat chunk er fire. I tell you dat chunk done us good service dat day. I wuz settin' on a log eatin' my own breakfus' w'en I yheres a whoop. I jus' step t' de side uv de road whar I could git a glimpse uv de bayou through de trees, en dar dey wuz, dem ve'y two gorillers, bofe uv 'em ridin' one po' ol' brood mar' double. They warn't ridin' her ve'y fas' jis' den, do'. Dey wuz standin' stock still a lookin' at dat burnin' bridge, an' a cussin' de a'r blue. Dey didn't see me. I ve'yly b'lieve dey would 'a' took a long-range shot at me ef dey hed. Well, jus' t' look at 'em was breakfus' 'nough fur me. I went back t' de wagin, en climin' in I made dem mules git furder. Dat wuz de sort uv smoove travellin' me an' Miss done."

That was the gravest episode of Scipio's travels until they came to the Federal camp, where he alone was admitted. There were some things taken for granted

in those warlike days. One was, I suppose, that the black man would always be true to his liberators. It was with infinite pathos that the old man told of his mistress's grief when she found, that, after all, she was not to be permitted within the lines. She might carry back information. Scipio alone was free to enter, and making the rounds in search of the wounded boys for whose sake they had both risked so much. It was with simple directness that he described his mournful task. Told how they asked him first if it was F. Holcombe he was looking for, and showed him that name among the list of those who had died in hospital the day before. He might see the dead man, but he told them he knew of no F. Holcombe.

"You see, son, dat comes from want uv book l'arnin'. F. en Frazer don' soun' 'like t' me. So I jes' tol' 'm I wanted t' see Marse Spence. I foun' him. I knowed him, too. My po' boy. It was jus' 'bout de las' time he ever open he's eyes. He open 'em wide, en w'en he see me standin' over 'm, an' he smile an' say soft-like: 'Mother mus' be near.' Yes, son, he's mother wuz near, but Heaven wuz nearer. Marse Spence's breff wen' from him wid dem words."

Old Scipio's bowed head sank a little lower, and he drew his ragged cuff across his eyes. He need not have been ashamed of the tears that glistened in his eyes. He was silent for a second. "War's a mouty rough thing, son. I s'pose they was bleezed t' be hard on ol' Miss. They wouldn' 'low her inside the lines, less 'n she'd 'gree to stay thar. She couldn' do that wid Miss Nannie en Miss Bella at home. So, arter all her pains, she didn' even see Marse Spence like I seen him, white en col', but peaceful-lookin', like he was

tekin' a rest. When I ax 'em might I cut off a piece uv his ha'r fur ol' Miss, dey didn't object. Miss seem' mighty glad to git even dat much.

"W'en I tol' her 'bout F. Holcombe, she 'sist on my goin' back en lookin' at him. But it was too late. Dat's w'at mek's folks so pos'tive 'bout Marse Fraze. But, as fur me, I ain' sho' yit."

The fire had burned down and the rain was dripping drearily from the mouth of the tin gutter that environed the eaves of the old house when Scipio, rising stiffly from the diminished wood-pile, went away and left me to dream of the Holcombe boys, whose bedroom was now mine.

CHAPTER XI.

SETTLING DAY.

MAIL-DAY in the Crooked Creek neighborhood was the day of all others on which patience had an opportunity to perfect its work. It was frequently productive of mild profanity, but seldom of surprises. There are no railroads within many miles of Montrose, nor is it likely there ever will be. The Mississippi River is, and perhaps will always remain, the great highway of travel for that section, and the mail-packet Uncle Sam's fleetest-footed messenger. Inland, the nearest chance storekeeper is, by force of circumstances, Postmaster. The nearest chance storekeeper to my sojourning place was one Timotheus Barnes, who, as set forth orally, kept the largest assorted stock of "wearables and eatables" in the town of Buena Vista. This classic appellation had been bestowed upon a hamlet about ten miles from the Holcombe place, presumably because it was absolutely devoid of any view at all. Timotheus Barnes's superb miscellaneous establishment, two or three humble imitators, or rivals of his, a blacksmith's shop, and the doctor's cottage constituted the town of Buena Vista.

Towards this dizzy vortex, twice a week, a messenger from Montrose, mounted on a mule and laden with the week's accumulation of letters written by the *business* manager and me, was despatched for the mail.

It was usual to give him a "starter" in the kitchen of the big house, in shape of a "square breakfast." If he returned by sundown, he was entitled to a vote of thanks, or at the least, honorable mention and another "square" meal. Thus expeditiously there came to the Holcombe house one day a letter addressed vaguely to "The Lawyer at Montrose." The business manager, always tenacious of his rights as first incumbent, usually had the first handling of the letters. After looking at this one in a variety of positions, he handed it across the table, where I was already halfway down the first page of a letter from my youngest sister.

"Must be for you," he said, somewhat reluctantly, as if his preference would have been to have that unusual document opened by anyone but "the lawyer at Montrose."

I, too, examined it with that unsatisfying deliberation which people will bestow upon a sealed communication whose chirography, postmark, and general appearance are entirely new to them. I think I was prompted to an exaggeration of deliberation by the too evident desire of the business manager to know what it might mean. The contents of that letter, however, were curious enough to have excited a more phlegmatic man than the business manager, had he had the benefit of them, which he did not. The first glance showed the work of an uneducated person. My letter was signed "A. Frazer," and it was written from a small town in Virginia of which I had never heard, but its contents were of importance to a good many people, which accounts for the poor scrawl still being among my papers, enabling me to copy it verbatim:

"SIR: It has come to my ears, through good luck ruther than good manidgement, that the old Holcombe place is about to be sold. I've begged my son, Walter, almost on my knees, to write to somebody about it and see if he ain't intitled to something, and as he won't do it, I've takin it on myself to look after his rights. We are that bad off that most anything would be a lift. I've asked Wallie to write and tell you all about the case, but though he is quiet and easy-goin' at most times, I make sure he'd be mad 'nough to kill me if he knew what I was doing.

"My son, Walter Frazer, was known as Frazer Holcombe, and it's hard to see him, who wasn't raised to do a lick of work, trying to support me and himself at clerking when his health ain't none too good at that.

"I am sure his aunt, Mrs. Holcombe, wasn't the woman to turn him loose on the world after she'd adopted him for her very own. I never meant to have pestered Wallie, and if he'd never found out the truth from anybody but me, he'd have lived and died thinking he was the oldest son of them high-flying Holcombes.

"Mr. Frazer, my husband, acted like he was ashamed of me after he'd married me and taken me away from the company where I was making a good living, and he vowed his son should be raised by his own people. I didn't raise any objections, for I wasn't used to children, and I knew my boy would be better off with his rich aunt than with a father that was just making ducks and drakes of everything he had. Mr. Frazer was just wrapped up in that boy, and after he'd given him to his sister it looked like he couldn't make 'way with himself fast enough. He died about two

years after the Holcombes took Wallie. My son won't ever let me talk about it, for after he'd hunted me up of his own accord and satisfied himself that I was really his mother, he just cut loose from the old life, dropped the Holcombe, and said he would rather they'd all think he'd been killed. He never even wrote a line to his aunt Holcombe, which I didn't think was the proper way to treat her. But Wallie's got a will of his own. We came on to Virginia during the war. Wallie joined the army and fought all through it. He thought maybe he could find something belonging to his father, but he'd mortgaged the last foot of land long before he died. It was in a New Orleans paper that Wallie read about the old Holcombe place about to be sold, but when I asked him to write on and see if there wasn't something coming to him from the old lady who was his father's own dear sister, he almost as good as told me to hold my tongue, and he looked like a thundercloud when he done it, too.

"I tell you this, kind sir, so that you will please not let my son know how you got track of him, for I know he done everything he could to make his old friends believe he was dead, but if you find there is anything coming to Wallie in the old lady's will, be so obliging as to forward it under cover to Mrs. Amelia Frazer, Lime Rock, Virginia, his mother, and oblige your obedient, A. Frazer." "P. S.—Wallie's cough is very bad this fall. I'm of the opinion, from some things that my son has let drop, that there is a old gentleman in your neighborhood, if he ain't dead, that was the late Mrs. H.'s adviser after the late Mr. H. died. He would know, for sure, if there was anything coming to my son Walter. His name is Major Ransom."

I experienced a sensation of profound gratitude to my illiterate correspondent, who had unexpectedly put in my hands the information I had been groping blindly for all these months. That suggestion in the postscript about Major Ransom I considered so valuable that I proposed to act on it at once. Frazer Holcombe must not elude my grasp before syndicate matters were finally adjusted. I could read his whole sad story between the lines of his ignorant mother's letter. Too manly to repudiate the woman who gave him birth, too proud to acknowledge her in the circle where he himself best fitted socially, he had virtually buried himself, and doubtless would, if he should discover what this woman had done, make fresh efforts to efface all traces of his whereabouts and of his existence.

I must interview Major Ransom at once. My impatience spurred me into hiring a horse from one of the quarter people, and sent me cantering at a brisk pace down Bristow's lane towards the house behind the althea bushes.

I found it looking inexpressibly forlorn that chill autumnal day. The plain white muslin curtains were drawn rigidly down inside the shutterless windows; the yellowing leaves of the tall sweet-gums, which stood in the hoof-beaten space outside, had fluttered into the yard and lay wet and glistening on the uneven brick walk. A bombastic red rooster had mounted the front steps, and in his exploration of the gallery floor had found some choice morsel upon which he was vociferously inviting his harem to come and banquet. A weak-limbed, fuzzy-coated, young colt was staggering aimlessly about the silent premises.

No sign of human occupancy was visible to the eye. I dismounted, and, making my way hastily up the leaf-strewn walk, knocked on the gallery post with my cowhide whip. The red rooster scuttled away before me with a great clattering of spurs, turning valiantly at a safe distance to flap his wings and send back a defiant crow. I was about to repeat my knock for the third time, when a colored woman appeared around one end of the house, with a wet sheet, which she had evidently just wrung out of the suds, coiled about her shining ebony arms. She looked damp and resentful.

"Yhere's me," she said laconically.

"I want to see Major Ransom," I said.

"He ain' yhere; he's gone t' town t' see 'bout de ol' man's cott'n."

This was comprehensive but vague. "Miss Ransom, then," I said.

"She ain' yhere nuther; she's hevin' de trees frash t'day."

"When will they return?" I asked.

She looked up at the sun, gave a fresh twist to the sheet on her arms, which resulted in a sprinkle of soap-suds on the front breadths of her blue cotton dress, then informed me that the Major or his daughter might come back to the house any time "betwix" that and supper time.

I had become sufficiently naturalized to understand from the woman's information that Miss Ransom was having the pecan trees thrashed, and I wondered at the suggestion of juvenile vivacity that could send this lonely young woman off into the woods on a nutting expedition with no companions of her own class or sex. As my interlocutor did not even leave

it optional with me whether I would wait for the return of the family or not, I turned away feeling provoked at this enforced delay in my business. As I rode back through the lane I took observations right and left. It was not improbable that the nutting party might be in view of the road, in which case I should not hesitate to leave a message with the Major's daughter, to the effect that I wanted to see him that evening on a matter of importance, and should ride down again after an early tea. The young trees, sassafras bushes, sumachs, and elders crowded the fence-corners so densely that I could scarcely see over them even from the back of the tall, rawboned beast I bestrode. It was from above that I heard the note of warning which located Miss Ransom for me.

"Look out dar! I'se gwine to frash."

Quick blows, followed by a pattering shower and the shouts of eager, childish voices came from the centre of an old field just to my right. I hitched my horse to the "rider" of the fence, and, standing on the top rail, obtained a view of the nutting party. Miss Ransom was sitting on a fallen log, a passive spectator of the activity under the pecan-tree, where about twenty small black imps of both sexes were engaged in frenzied competition for the nuts that were raining down from above, pelting their half-clad backs and their bare heads in a solid shower. Baskets, caps, bags, old tin cans, buckets, basins, anything that would hold, were filled rapidly, and borne in triumph to the young lady on the log, who methodically measured them and emptied them in a huge bag by her side. She had an open blank-book on her knee, and was making entries in it when I reached her, and addressed

her with such suddenness that she started nervously and let the lead pencil drop from her hand.

"I beg your pardon," I said, stooping to recover it for her, "both for startling you and for intruding upon your frolic."

"Frolic!" She looked at me curiously as she repeated the word. "This is a purely commercial transaction. You know we are growing very thrifty nowadays. I pay the children in molasses and sugar for picking up the nuts, which I sell for $8 a barrel. We used never to think of gathering the pecans. We should have thought it mean. But things have changed, you know."

She had risen and was standing before me, looking shy and nervous. She saw so few strangers, this once gay, dashing Miss Matilda, that she seemed to find even my prosaic personality disturbing. Yes, things had changed tremendously. I explained the motive for my intrusion and charged her with a message for her father.

"If your business is of importance," she said, blushing beautifully, but looking at me with troubled eyes, "perhaps it would be better for you to ride on into town to see my father, unless you can wait until tomorrow morning. I am afraid he will be tired when he gets back this evening, and—you might not find him willing to talk business."

I understood her fears, thanked her, and was about to turn away when she called after me nervously:

"One moment, Mr. Halsey! Is it anything about the purchase of the old place?"

With brutal lack of thought I answered, "No; it concerns Mr. Frazer Holcombe exclusively," and it

was only when she turned ghastly white to the very lips that I bethought me of what I had done.

"You will find father at Barnes," she said huskily, and, turning abruptly from me, resumed her occupation of measuring the pecans which were being pressed upon her notice by a dozen pairs of eager little black hands at once.

I had never seen Buena Vista looking quite as lively as it did on that occasion. But then I had never happened to go there before at what was called "settling-up" time. There was more than the usual quota of mules tethered to the horse-racks in front of Barnes's and the rival establishments. There were, perhaps, more than a dozen wagons in the hamlet piled high with corpulent cotton-bales, tightly girded about with iron ties. Barnes and his rivals beamed upon these cargoes with proprietary interest.

On the various galleries were knots of dusky laborers, to whose coarse, patched garments tufts of lint cotton clung tenaciously, souvenirs of recent service at the gin. As a rule, these dusky planters looked sullen and dissatisfied. Occasionally, one of their number, strutting in a suit of new shoddy, showed his shining ivory teeth in a grin of malicious satisfaction in his own astuteness, which had kept him out of the financial quagmire the majority of them were floundering in. This thing of thinking and managing for themselves was so new to them yet, that it was confusing. Barnes and his rivals alone comprehended why it was that at the close of a year's hard labor the bewildered freedman found himself virtually just where he was when he started.

I found the Major at Barnes's, and congratulated

myself on the clearness of his fine blue eyes and the gentlemanly erectness of his bearing. I felt quite sure he was "at himself," but as he seemed busy at the moment of my entrance, I helped myself to one of Mr. Barnes's highly polished wooden chairs to wait for him to be at leisure. He acknowledged my lifted hat with a bow of cold courtesy. An old negro was standing by his side, holding his battered hat respectfully in both hands, while his dim eyes wandered anxiously from the Major's face to that of Mr. Barnes's bookkeeper, who, with an open ledger before him, stood on the other side of the counter.

"I wouldn't take the trouble for another free nigger on earth," the Major was saying, when I came in, "but Eben's stuck by me through thick and thin, and I'm going to help him to find out why it is that there isn't anything coming to him from his four bales of cotton. We want an itemized account, sir. I can read it, if he can't."

"Dat's de word wid de bark on it," said Eben, with a feeble chuckle of reviving hope.

"One gallon of whiskey," the clerk read out in tartly impatient tones.

The Major made no comment. Perhaps conscience could suggest none.

"Six plugs of tobacco, one jar strawberry preserves, one ditto quince."

"What in the devil did you want with one jar of strawberry preserves, and one ditto quince?" the Major spluttered, savagely turning on Eben.

Eben scratched his head reflectively before answering apologetically: "I eet de strawberries, marse, but I don't recall no ditto. No, sir (waxing more positive),

all I axes is justus. I owns up t' de strawberries, but you must scratch out dat odder. I don' know nuthin' 'bout de jar er ditto. I think thar's a mistake somewhar', I does indeed. I don' recall buyin' no ditto."

"One quart of whiskey, one peck of meal, one peck of dried apples——" The Major took contemptuous exception to the dried apples. "Dried apples is mouty fillin', marse," Eben pleaded, "en I'se got a sight er no count moufs to feed. Tain' lak it usen to be when de chillun wuz sent up t' de nuss-house t' be tuck keer uv in daytime."

"Nothing is as it used to be," the Major roared; "we've all gone to the dogs together, Eb. Go on, sir" (this to Mr. Barnes's bookkeeper).

"Six pounds of pork, one gallon of molasses, one quart of whiskey, one photograph album——"

"The devil and Tom Walker!" Major Ransom thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and turned to look scathingly at Eben from the crown of his gray head to the toes of his shabby boots.

"That were a mistake, too, marse. I done tuk de stopper out'n dat bottle of whuskey too soon. A nigger feels mouty rich arter one drink, marse, en I jus' look roun' fur somethin' t' tek home to Mandy, 'en de clerk, he say dat book would look tiptop on de chimbley, en I 'lowed he knowed, but Mandy, she sorter differ wid 'im. She tuk dat book en she sent it swingin' thro' de a'r."

"At you?" the Major asked, with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Not jus' egzackly at me, marse, but I happin' t' be in de way en my lef' eye stop it. It didn't hu't de

book none. I'd like t' trade it back wid you, if you please, Marse Clerk."

"Shall I go on, sir?" the clerk said, addressing himself impatiently to Major Ransom.

"No, sir," the old man answered sternly, "and I suppose I ought to apologize for the trouble I've given already. As long as you've got the right to set up your shops like mushrooms in every man's field, if you want to, and ply these poor idiots with your vile whiskey, just that long their year's labor will go to enrich you and impoverish them. Eben, you've swapped masters, that's all. You used to be called my slave, now you belong to Mr. Tim Barnes, and he makes you jump a little harder than I ever did. I haven't got a vote, sir" (this wrathfully to Mr. Barnes, who had just joined the group), "and I never expect to have one again. I haven't any country to vote in, but if I had, I'd make it a penal offence, sir—by the Lord Harry, I would, sir—for anyone of you to sell a drop of whiskey in your store. I know what you want to say, but——" His voice changed suddenly; it dropped from its angry pitch to a tone of quiet authority. "Eben, go home."

Eben turned promptly and left the store. "Credit him with one bale of cotton," the Major said, "and charge his balance to me." At last I was at liberty to approach him on my own business. I considered the moment rather propitious, as he had just done a generous thing, which usually has a mellowing effect on a man. I told him what I had come for, as explicitly as I could without mentioning Mrs. Frazer's letter. He began to congeal as soon as I had forced myself upon

him. From a business point of view this was immaterial.

"Am I to understand," he asked, "that you are working in the interest of some unknown claimant to Montrose? It is probable that Mrs. Holcombe did make a will. She was a long-sighted, methodical woman; but as there is but one surviving member of the Holcombe family, her married daughter, whose husband has been negotiating with a syndicate of Northern capitalists, I understand, her affairs should be very simple of settlement. I beg to refer you to the gentleman just mentioned."

His manner said more plainly than his words that I need expect no assistance from him, which was exasperating, but not conclusive.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAJOR'S VOW.

I ALWAYS retreat under fire when I can find any place to retreat to. Ignominious but true. I retreated as far as Barnes's store gallery under fire from Miss Matilda Ransom's supercilious parent. A second time I had been distinctly snubbed by him. A fellow-feeling made Barnes's bookkeeper wondrous kind on that occasion. I was inwardly chafing over the long delay that must necessarily ensue before I could possibly receive any information from "Miss Nannie" herself on the subject of a probable will, by reason of this old man's exasperating obstinacy, when a soothing voice close at my elbow said:

"You mustn't mind a few sharp words from the old Major; he's a sorter privileged character. He's all right at bottom. Kinder-hearted man never lived. You see he's had a heap to sour him, He was wrapped up in that boy Will of his, and when Will found his way home mos' dead with softenin' of the brain after he got out of Alton jail, the old man jus' broke down entirely. You won't mind my saying it to you, but I've heard old Ransom say that them as has any dealings with Northern folks are traitors to their own sons and friends that was killed or died during the war. That's his way of looking at it, you see. A mighty poor way, and lucky that everybody ain't

so unforgiving; but you see he was just wrapped up in Will. Never would drink a drop when Will was home from college, for fear of his taking to it too. I I think the old man expected Will would be another Daniel Webster. He had it in him. He was as sharp as a tack and as quick as chain lightning. The old man hasn't cared for anything since Will died. They say Miss Tillie has a hard time with him, and I reckon she does."

Somebody called the bookkeeper back to his desk just then. This explanation certainly had the effect of softening my judgment of old Major Ransom, although I did not become immediately reconciled to the prospect of being made the scapegoat for a nation. If I could not use him, he should not misuse me.

I had not given the well-meaning bookkeeper my undivided attention while he was talking. I had been watching a straggling procession coming down the road led by a dolorously creaking wagon, to which was attached a very unevenly matched yoke of oxen —one, a veteran in the field, whose spreading horns and prominent shoulder-blades antedated by several years those of the unruly young steer who shared his yoke most unwillingly. There were two bales of cotton on the wagon, and, as I discovered a little later, the procession that straggled closely in its wake consisted of the various claimants thereto. Perhaps my interest was quickened by seeing my friend Scipio and his wife Anarky in the procession. Scipio was afoot, but Anarky, resplendent in a Dolly Varden calico, was mounted on a mule gorgeously caparisoned in a red cotton velvet side-saddle and a yellow list bridle. *It was the first* time I had ever seen Anarky in a bon-

net, and as she wore hers as a superstructure over her flaming bandanna, it occupied a very prominent position in the world. She beamed in a friendly fashion on me as she scrambled from the red-velvet side-saddle to Barnes's store gallery with an unblushing display of blue woolen socks, stout ankles, and ruffled petticoats. It was evident coming to town was an era in Anarky's life.

"I didn' 'low to fin' you yhere, boss," she said; "seems lak all de worl' was in Vista t'day."

"I came on business," I said.

"En so did I. Folks haster look mighty sharp arter der own dese days ef dey don' want t'come out at de little end er de ho'n. I ho'p Unk Sam Baker pick dem two bales er cott'n out, en I gwine to have my pay befo' I lose sight er dem two bales er cott'n sho's you is bo'n."

There was an air of resolute determination about Anarky that made her look unfamiliar, or perhaps it was the bonnet. Scipio had led the brilliantly caparisoned mule off to the long rack and hitched it to one of the few unappropriated pegs. He now joined us, looking less prosperous, but no less resolute than Anarky. I reproached him for deserting me of late.

"Well, you see, son, it's jes' this way." He took off his hat and busied himself with its linty accretions while talking. "I'se got to be at dat gin-house day en night. I 'low somethin' would go wrong ef I didn'. You see, we runs de gin now on sheers; en I'se got to look to de folks fur my pay. Sam Baker ain' pay me yit fur ginnin' dem two bales er cott'n."

He turned and looked rather vindictivly at Sam, the unhappy proprietor of the two bales of cotton, who,

having taken his mismatched beasts from the wagon, and led them, still yoked together, to the distant spot where he had thrown down several bundles of fodder, was now coming towards the gallery, mopping his furrowed forehead with an old blue checked handkerchief. He was old and bent. His face was careworn, and not even the propriety brand on the end of those two bales of cotton could dispel the signs of anxiety from his wrinkled face. He, too, was there to settle up. Several more interested parties joined the group about Sam. Scip enlightened me. They all belonged to Sam's squad, and the fruits of their year's labor were bound up in those two bales of cotton. Scipio seemed to think that the meagreness of this showing reflected discredit on somebody, and therefore ought to be apologized away if possible.

"You see, son," he said when Sam, followed by his squad, had gone on into the store to hear his doom, "old man Sam ain' so spry as he used t' be, en ef I couldn' mek folks min' any better'n he kin, I'd give up cott'n plantin' en pick 'simmons fur a livin'. Sam planted fur ten bales uv cott'n, but he done come out wid two arter payin' his lan' rent. It warn't all his fault, fur de rain git him in de grass, en his hands all went off huntin' we'n dey should 'a' ben gettin' him out'n de grass; en den de worms come, en arter dat, protracted meetin', jus' w'en dey ought to ben pickin'. I feels sorry fur Sam, I does dat, but I ain' sorry 'nough fur him not t' git my pay fur ginnin' him out. I mus' see how he comin' out."

Scipio, too, left me and joined the group about the desk inside, where old Sam, tall and gaunt, stood like a hunted thing at bay, while the various claimants

to his cotton clamored for their shares, and clamored in vain, for the unthrift and foolish extravagance of a year stared them in the face now in a merciless array of figures that only confused and bewildered them more.

"I hope you are satisfied with your work, sir. These men and brothers look to me like a crowd of poor devils in a quagmire, but I suppose you see in them only the enlightened citizens of the future." It was the first time old Mr. Ransom had voluntarily addressed me. It was done in bitterness then. An angry retort sprang to my lips. I looked defiantly in the old man's face. It was flushed, and his fine eyes were dim and hazy. Fortunately, in time I bethought me of that dead boy Will and of the universal ruin that had overtaken this embittered old man. I put mother (an excellent hater) in his place, and the retort died on my lips. He passed me, and going unsteadily down the steps, mounted his horse and rode slowly away. I was glad to see him leaving Buena Vista so early in the afternoon—glad for the sake of that lonely woman in the house behind the altheas. There was no especial reason why I should not have left town at the same time, seeing that his departure deprived me of my last chance of obtaining in that quarter any information about a will; but I found myself growing curiously interested in Sam Baker's fate. This style of transacting business was so entirely novel to me, that I was willing to wait for the outcome. My curiosity cost me dear. The angry haggling and storm of protest about the clerk's desk finally subsided into a sullen mutter of discontent. There was no use battling against the inevitable.

Sam reappeared with his badgered look intensified tenfold. Scipio was at his elbow; Anarky, with a clouded brow, close behind, while the squad, scowling as by one consent, brought up the rear. The weary clerk closed his big book with a bang.

"Yhere's yo' man," said Scipio, advancing eagerly on me. "Son, I wants you to settle a p'int fur us. De clerk says he got what's comin' to him, en we kin settle de res' 'mong ourseffs, er else git a Philadelphy lawyer t' do it fur us. You's lawyer 'nough for me, en de shade of dat syc'mo' tree yonder's good 'nough co't-house. You's willin' t' lef' it t' him, Sam?" (This with an anxious glance at Sam.)

Sam spread his hands with a despairing gesture. "I'se willin' to anythin'. I done tired out. You cyarn' git blood out'n a turnip, en you cyarn' get no mo' money out'n dat piece uv a bale dat Barnes is lef me den is in it, kin you?"

"I kin git some pay for my ginnin'," said Scip, stolidly.

"En fur my pickin'," Anarky added, promptly.

"I'se got a claim dar myseff, ef you please, boss. I plough up de lan' for Sam Baker wid my own team," one of the squad looked over her shoulder to say. "Me en my brer Jim, yhere, we wurk in dat crap from de beginnin' t' de end, en all we axes is jestus," came from the rear.

"Yes, jestus," chorused the squad.

I began to comprehend why the clerk had advised them to take the matter to a Philadelphia lawyer. I doubted the ability of an inexperienced Boston attorney to satisfy the conflicting claims of these many claimants, but with Scipio garrulously insisting upon

telling me "jis how it was," and Anarky confidently asserting that she would be "satisfied with my say-so," and poor old bewildered Sam reiterating that he was willing to anything, I consented to act as umpire in the matter, seeing that my day was so far gone that it mattered very little what I did with the remnant of it.

I decided my first case in equity seated on an empty barrel which Scipio had courteously rolled under the branches of the sycamore tree for my convenience. It was an intricate piece of business, involving the rights of six people and the equitable division of a slender remnant of cotton, but it was invaluable to me as an exposition of the working system on the plantations. The best part of the day was gone when we got through with it, and I had a ten-mile ride before me, the longer portion of which lay through the darkening woods.

Scipio brought my horse from the rack to the improvised court-room under the tree. He never lost an opportunity to serve me. "Ef you'd like to tek a short cut home, son," he said, tightening my saddle-girth while he spoke, "turn off to yo' lef' w'en you git to de forks uv de road, en it'll tek you by de ol' Ransom yard en down through Bristow's lane. You'll save two miles by goin' dat way."

I was quite willing to save two miles, so I took his advice, and, turning to the left when I got to the forks of the road, cantered as briskly as my sorry nag could be induced to go. I had never taken that route before, and when I passed from the wooded road through a large gate into some partially cultivated fields, I took it for granted I was

on the Ransom place. I could see the dilapidation of the cabins even in that dusky light, and great intervals of brambly growth where the fields were lying fallow for want of laborers. The full moon rose majestically over the tops of the trees that bounded the place before I had traversed the long stretch of road that ran through these poorly kept lands. My thoughts ran perpetually towards the old man who had preceded me over this same ground several hours before. He was safely at home long before this, of course, and I liked to think it. Through another gate I passed once more into the shadows cast by tall trees, but it was only a grove this time, a grove that had at one time intervened between the broad utilitarian acres of cotton and corn and the luxurious home of the Ransoms. I knew it when I saw the two tall chimneys of brick standing alone like monuments of desolation in the near perspective. An ornamented fence had doubtless once inclosed the premises, for at regular intervals stood posts, whose ornate caps, struggling above clasping vines, showed pallid in the moonlight. Between the two tall chimneys was an irregular mound, grown over now with the wild blackberry and countless weeds. The moon, which seemed to rest on the coping of one of the chimneys, flooded these ruins of a home with placid silvery light.

I was about to ride on, feeling that hereafter it would be still easier for me to be patient with the old man whose hopes all lay buried under that weed-grown pile, when from behind a clump of bushes, the Major's gaunt white horse stalked slowly. His head was down, and he was biting off the tough dry grass with audible

snips, trying vainly, meanwhile, to extricate himself from the bridle which was tangled about his feet. I was on my own feet as soon as I could secure my horse to a limb. The old man had come to grief and needed help, was my first conclusion. My second was that I had intruded where I was not needed, and had better withdraw as noiselessly as possible. Passing rapidly around the useless chimneys, I had been guided by sounds that came to me from what, I judged by the tangle of overgrown shrubbery, must once have been the Ransom's flower-garden. In the midst of it was a low, whitewashed brick vault; standing by this, with his gray hair bared to the night dews, was the object of my search. It was his voice, ringing loudly and defiantly on the still night air, which had guided me.

"It wouldn't be right, my boy, I can't do it. It wouldn't be fair to you. Let them call me what they choose—fool, rebel, traitor; I swore it over your coffin, and I swore it over the smoking ruins of our home, my boy, to hate them and hurt them all I could. We've got peace now, son—that is what they call it—but it can't bring you back to me, Will, and I can't forget how they treated you. I try to, but I can't. It won't be forgot. When I forget you, son, I'll forget all the rest. When I forget what you suffered, boy, I'll forgive them; yes, I'll forgive them then, but not before. I'm glad you can't see what a dog the've made of the old man, son; it would hurt you; yes, but it can't hurt a girl. They ruined us all, boy, and if ever I find my heart growing soft towards them, I'll come back here and swear my oath over again on your grave—swear to hate them, swear to curse them, swear to never give them aid or comfort in thought, in word,

or in deed. How can I, son, how can I, without forgetting you first? Oh, Will, my boy, my boy!"

From the frenzy of imprecation his voice dropped to a plaintive wail. I stood afar off looking at the desolate old man. His long white hair, shining in the moon's rays, fell about his bowed head. His trembling arms were stretched wide over the low vault that held his precious dead. Impotent for harm, steeling his heart against the world, he excited nothing but pity. I turned like a culprit and stole back to the spot where I had tethered my horse.

It would never do to precede him along that lonely road. I would wait back there in the grove until he rode on. He should not know how he had betrayed himself. Moreover, I could not bring myself to lose sight of him before we reached his house. I did not have to wait long. He came around the chimney presently, and disentangling the bridle from the old horse's feet, climbed laboriously into the saddle. Facing toward the ruin of his home, he once more took his hat from his head, and lifting his feeble right arm heavenward, registered a vow which only the angels heard, and doubtless, pitied. Sitting there motionless for a second with his bared head bowed upon his breast, he made a picture which memory has faithfully retained ever since.

He passed out into the shadowed road between two of the gateposts, and turned his horse's head homeward. I saw him draw something from the old-fashioned saddle-bags beneath him. There was a faint gleam in the dark as a ray of light fell on the flat-glass flask he carried eagerly to his lips. He drained it empty and flung it far from him in the woods. There

was oblivion for him in its contents. That was all he seemed to ask at the hands of fate these latter days. Fancy outstripped the gaunt, steady-stepping gray horse that seemed to be carrying its unsteady rider safely home of its own accord. What a long and lonely vigil the Major's daughter must be holding that night, waiting and watching for him! I felt quite sure that she belonged to that large class of sensitive women who supplement the misery of the actual with an inexhaustible supply of imagined horrors. Doubtless by this time she had gone over the whole catalogue of accidents liable to befall a man coming home as the Major was, over a lonely country road, lighted only by the distant moon. Taking a man's cold-blooded practical view of the situation, it seemed to me best to keep my unreconstructed old neighbor in view.

Fortunately, this was not difficult, as the soft dirt road and the slow gait at which we progressed muffled the sound of my horse's feet. I drew rein when we neared his gate and waited for him to enter. I saw the lamplight glimmering in the front windows of the little house. The curtains were drawn back; the gray horse stopped of his own accord at the gate and uttered an intelligent neigh. It must have been his way of letting Miss Ransom know he had done his duty by her father. The lamplight shifted. The front door opened quickly. Down the walk with uncovered head the Major's daughter came swiftly. She opened the gate and stepped aside for the old horse to enter. He walked demurely up to the front steps, and sagaciously accommodating himself to the Major's necessities, turned sidewise to the unrailed gallery. Clasping one of the posts, the Major dismounted and stumbled out

of sight through the open door. With her own soft hands the lady loosened the saddle-girth, slipped the headstall from the old gray's head, and, patting him gently on the neck, gave him the liberty of the yard. I could hear her utter some gentle words of commendation for his faithful service. I could hear the old horse's ponderous sigh of relief as he shook himself and turned away to forage for a supper. I could hear Miss Ransom let the heavy saddle and bridle fall on the gallery floor. Then she went in, and closing the doors, shut me out from the tragedy of her life.

No. "It could not hurt a girl." The Major's daughter was one of the war heroines we have *not* heard about.

CHAPTER XIII.

MY KUKLUX KLAN.

A COLLECTION of "Southern autumn leaves" was my youngest sister's whimsey, conveyed in the somewhat unreasonable demand that I should send her a specimen of each sort labelled. Concluding that even should I betray my ignorance by misnaming every leaf, she would still have the satisfaction of talking to more ignorant friends, learnedly, about the new specimens in the old album I remembered so well, I set out near the close of a tiresome day devoted to business letters, to gratify my sister's desire. I rather congratulated myself on this enforced tramp through the woods where the gaunt limbs of the trees creaked rheumatically or lashed themselves against their blackened trunks like world-weary anchorites senselessly scourging themselves. Since the autumn had set in the roads about Crooked Creek had been gashed into unsightly ruts and worn into abysmal mud-holes by the constant hauling of heavy loads of cotton over them, so that there was little satisfaction in going about.

There was no scarcity of material for filling a girl's album lying thickly all about, as soon as I left the big road behind me, but I purposed being very choice in filling this commission, if not very accurate. I remembered having noticed certain vivid yellow leaves with black polka dots, which I considered worth exporting;

also some fine specimens of nature's bronze work which I felt sure my sister would pronounce "perfectly lovely." I believed they belonged respectively to the sweet-gum and the water-oak. At any rate, they should go North so labelled after I found them. It was on the Chapel road that I began my search, and the chapel itself was in sight before I had found what I wanted. Through the leafless trees I could see the low roof of the house where the Ransoms lived, and beyond it, quite far off, the sentinel chimneys of their old home gleamed redly in the gray evening light. It was very solemn and still in the woods. Only the long-drawn note of a cicada, which, high up in the branches of a tall tree, still rejoiced in the sunshine that had long since forsaken the leaf-strewn path under my feet, or the faint chirp of a brown cricket that bounded against my foot in its eager haste to avoid me, broke the stillness, until the notes of the organ stole solemnly out to me from the open door of the chapel, and I knew that the Major's daughter was solacing herself. The vine that had encircled the little building with a wall of emerald at my first visit, now begirt it with a brilliant mosaic of countless hues. The innocent resolve to add some of this autumnal gorgeousness to my collection without disturbing the musician, got me into trouble. Miss Ransom's four-footed guardian evidently took a large view of his own responsibility, for, abandoning that attitude of conservative dignity which I had so much admired on a previous occasion, he gave one deep-toned note of warning before rushing towards me with celerity altogether disproportioned to his huge dimensions.

I should not have hesitated to fly, but for the swift

reflection that Miss Ransom would of course appear on the strength of the brute's bay, and to find me in full retreat would warrant absurd conclusions. So far it had been my invariable misfortune to appear at a disadvantage before this young lady. The wall of vegetable mosaic was between me and the foe. I stooped and seized a stick which I hoped might proved a deterrent. I branished it menacingly over the flaming vines. I don't know what impression this imposing show of valor might have made on King Cole, if, at that moment, Miss Ransom had not called him in an authoritative voice. She stood in the open door of the chapel. The sun, rallying for one last effort, sent a golden lance through the bare branches of the trees. It fell on the metallic ornament of the tiny spire, and set it glistening. It fell on the stained-glass chancel window, transforming it into an illuminated background for the pale, statuesque woman who stood there framed about by the interlacing branches of the Lamarque rose. Then it suddenly faded away, leaving the world enfolded in the settled gloom of an autumn twilight.

With my hat held respectfully aloft, I explained at full to this Madonna of the woods my innocent errand and purpose. I think Miss Ransom thought better of me from the moment she discovered I had sisters. Perhaps she reasoned that a man who was satisfied to wander about the woods on a raw autumn evening, gathering damp leaves to gratify a sister, was a weakling incapable of conceiving or executing any plans of villainy.

"I am glad you happened to come this way Mr. Halsey," she said, not in an especially friendly way,

but as if she had a purpose in view. "I know about the talk you tried to have with my father about Mrs. Holcombe. I don't think we have any right to allow our personal prejudices to stand in the way of your getting all the information you are entitled to. I was wondering, as I sat there in the chapel playing my old pieces in the dusk, if I ought not to write to you and tell you what I know myself. Of course, I cannot make father do anything he prefers to leave undone. I helped Nannie to nurse Mrs. Holcombe in her last illness. I was sitting up with her myself when the change for the worse came. She drew me down to her with a spasmodic movement, and tried to say something. All I could make out of it was, 'Anarky —knows.' If you can make anything out of that information you are entitled to it. There has never been any talk about a will, because Nannie was the only one left. Now I must hurry home." She was turning away from me abruptly when I said with an amount of decision that quite surprised me when I recalled it afterwards:

"Miss Ransom, I am going with you. There is no good reason why you should refuse my escort. If you had a brother who would allow a sister of mine to find her way home in this fashion, I should call him a——"

"I did have a brother once" (her face was flushing and her voice was trembling, but she submitted quietly when I drew her hand within my arm)—"oh! such a bright, beautiful brother. That is what is the matter with poor father. If only I could have been taken and Will left."

"Do you think any man who ever lived could be to

your father what you are?" I said, finding it easy and pleasant to speak comforting words to the poor child now that I had so violently broken down the barriers between us, and she was walking docilely by my side along the woodland path.

"If Will had lived," she answered, "there would not have been so much need for—for patience. It isn't the loss of money, or slaves, or home—it's Will. And that you know will last always. Poor father!" Then she began to talk of leaves, and to give me a great deal of information which I am afraid I did not profit by. I was thinking of her pathetic self-abnegation, of the extreme musicalness of her voice, and of my own gratitude to my sister and to King Cole, who was stalking majestically on the other side of Miss Ransom. She stopped abruptly when we reached her gate. It was quite dark, and I could see the Major walking moodily up and down the contracted front gallery, puffing at a short black pipe. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his gaze was fixed steadily on the rough boards he was treading.

"I wish I could ask you in," she said. She extended her hand graciously, and let it rest in mine lightly. "You have been very kind. Please try to understand." (This with an anxious glance towards the solitary figure on the gallery.)

I bowed reverently over the hand I did not dare press. "I do understand," I said, "and I thank you for speaking to me kindly at last. One question I would like to ask you: Are you not afraid to go to the chapel alone and return so late?"

She laid her white hand on King Cole's shaggy head. "I never go alone and I never return so late as this.

We lost time talking. But there are none but our own people about; I am not afraid. I think they would defend me loyally in case of danger. But there is none."

I opened the gate for her. I hated to think of the gloomy companionship she was going back to. I thought of the three girls at home, so much to each other and to me. They sometimes thought fate was "down on them" if they were disappointed of a new ball-dress or a trip to the sea-shore But they were good fellows for all that.

It was only after leaving Miss Ransom that I became aware of the collapsed condition of my breast-pocket. My memorandum-book, containing a lot of important papers, had fallen out of it. The only conclusion I could arrive at was, that when I had stooped for a weapon to defend myself against King Cole, it had become dislodged. I did not relish the idea of paying the chapel another visit that night, but I relished still less the prospect of leaving that book on the wet ground until the next day, so I patiently retraced my steps by the route I had come with Miss Ransom. There was not a gleam of light left in the woods by this time, and when I reached the ivied fence about the chapel I had to grope among the leaves for the book I was in search of. I had just seized it when I heard voices on the wagon road. There were two men and they were mounted. I could hear the lazy shuffling of their horses' or mules' feet in the soft dirt road. I experienced a slight thrill of surprise when, instead of passing on out of hearing, I could see the two dark forms turn aside from the wagon road, dismount, and hitch their ani-

mals to some bushes. Then they passed through the open gateway to the chapel, and approaching the little building, seated themselves on the steps. They were talking earnestly, but in such low tones that I could distinguish nothing they said—could not even tell if they were white men or black. Presently a whistle sounded from the wagon road—a long, low, experimental whistle. One of the men sitting on the chapel steps scratched a lucifer match and held it aloft. By that faint, flickering light I could see the muzzle of a gun lying across the knees of his companion. Over their soft felt hats mufflers were bound and twisted in clumsy folds. The newcomers joined them presently, and it was no longer possible to doubt that the secluded little chapel had been selected as a rendezvous for some purpose. I wondered if by a cautious flank movement I might not manage to catch the meaning of what they were saying, although I had reason to suppose from the desultory character of the talk and the long intervals of silence that their number was not yet complete. I had occasion to felicitate myself on the thick carpet of leaves under my feet, rendered noiseless by the night dew. I drew nearer to the chapel, still keeping the wall of vines between me and it, and took up a post of observation as close as was compatible with safety. The group about the steps was increased by the arrival of two more men within a few seconds after I had located myself. Evidently the leader of the gang, if gang it was, was among these later arrivals.

"If we mean what we say, we've got to show it to-night," he said, in a voice of surly determination, "and

that's what I'm here for. All of you that means business say I."

"Me," came unanimously from the group, which evidently knew its own mind, if it didn't know its grammar.

"Mind you, there's to be no backing out; you've asked me to go 'long with you, and I've consented, because I for one think it's time to straighten things up. If it can't be done one way, it's got to be done another. I suppose you all know there's enough law left in the land to make it hot for us if it leaks out."

"How it gwine leak out?"

I knew by that interrogation that one of the conspirators, at least, was a colored man. But the spokesman evidently was not.

"I don't mean it to," said the leader, with a dry laugh. "You've all got to swear on this before I take another turn."

There was a faint glow of light as the slide of a lantern was drawn back and then held immediately over a ghastly object sitting on the portico floor. It was a bleached and grinning skull. The group fell back before the harmless, hideous thing.

"Put your right hand on it and swear," said the leader authoritatively, adjusting the lantern so as to cast its fullest light on the shining cranium. Not a hand was extended. I fancied I could hear them breathing hard from where I stood. The leader, whose features were lost to me on the dark side of the lantern, waited for a second only.

"Then you mean that you are willing to let that brute Yankee have it all his own way again. I ain't going to wait on you very long. I've got other work

cut out that ain't depending on a lot of white-livered cowards that don't know their own mind. I thought you all said you was goin' to kill him!"

My heart stood still. I could feel my hair palpably rising on my horrified skull. Ice-water, in place of blood, coursed through my veins. I bit my lip to prevent the chattering of my teeth from becoming audible. I was not conscious of deserving to be called a "brute," but was not I the only "Yankee" within a radius of many miles about the spot where that blood-curdling threat had just been uttered? Had "sectional animosity" so blinded these "fiends incarnate" that they sought my life simply because I was an instrument for the transfer of a few miserable cotton plantations into the hands of Northern owners? Even in that moment of extreme suspense I was struck with the excessively familiar ring of my own agonized speculations. "Sectional animosity" and "fiends incarnate." Was I really, after repeatedly writing home that sectional animosity was all bosh (always excluding poor old Ransom), and the "fiends incarnate" figments of the brain, to experience in my own inoffensive person all the vindictive malice of the Kuklux Klan? What a shock to mother and the girls, who always carefully looked for the "Southern Outrage" items, to see my name in big black letters, headed, "Another Mississippi Outrage! Kuklux at Work! Tragic Fate of a Young Boston Lawyer!" A gleam of hope found lodgment in my fainting soul. I would stay where I was all night if need be. Those wretches should seek me in vain at Montrose. Doubtless their plan was to waylay me on the road. Was the business manager's jealousy at the bottom of this projected

Southern outrage? I even imagineo he was the leader.

While these frenzied speculations had occupied my whirling brain, my startling eyeballs had been turned upon the white skull. One by one, under the lash of the leader's scorn, the conspirators' hands had gone timidly out, touched it, and been swiftly withdrawn. They had all sworn!

"Now, then," said the leader, in tones of brisk encouragement, "we've made up our minds to do it; the next thing is how."

He had extinguished the light, and the conference went on in profound darkness. I heard the stock of a gun fall heavily on the floor. "I brought my gun, though I don't claim to be a firs'-class shot in the dark."

"I've got a navy," another fiend responded.

"Too much noise," said the leader. "We must stick him." A sensation as of cold metal suddenly coming in contact with my spine sent a prolonged shudder through my unhappy body. Evidently the verdict was for "sticking him." But if fortune favored me, the opportunity to stick the brute Yankee should not be forthcoming that night. To-morrow I would shake the dust of Crooked Creek from the shoes in which I was just then quaking.

Having strangled conscience, the conspirators proceeded with the details of the dark deed to which they had devoted that dark night, with diabolical deliberation, placing themselves docilely at the command of their leader.

"It must be finished up clean before daylight—no tracks left behind. You've not got to leave hair nor

hide to tell on you. Larkins, you and Ben get the grave ready by the time we get here with the carcass. It's a sorter pity, for he's got his good points, but can't be helped. Sim, you and Rawlins take your stand at the green gate. If he gets away from us, he'll have to go out that way; and have your knives ready. You two fellows with the mules will have to do the rest. Now, then, do you know just what you've got to do, each one of you? There's no pulling back now."

There was a universal assent, a final reminder on the leader's part of the solemnity of the oath they had taken. Then they passed from under the shelter of the chapel portico into the dark road beyond, still talking earnestly. I remained motionless until the sound of their footsteps died away in the distance. The whole fiendish plan was in my possession. It must certainly have been by the direct interposition of Providence that I had been sent back to that spot at that particular juncture. I preserved my stunned attitude needlessly long. I could not make too sure of the departure of the Klan. I recalled with gratitude that I had noticed just where Miss Ransom had hung the heavy iron key to the chapel that afternoon. I crept around the ivied fence to the opening. I was growing stiff in the joints from my long standing in the night air. I found no difficulty in letting myself into the chapel.

When I crept out of it again the gray light of another day was just stealing through the leafless trees. I was physically racked and morally humiliated. I walked as rapidly as my stiff joints would permit towards the house on the terrace. It seemed a century since I had left my room the day before, bent

on the innocent errand of gathering autumn leaves for my youngest sister. The whole white-and-gray world was left to misery and to me. I neither saw nor heard anything between the chapel door and my own bedroom, where I promptly flung myself into bed.

That night Scipio entered my room with an unusually liberal supply of wood. He was full of sympathetic concern for me. The report had reached him that I was laid up with the "rheumatics."

"You's 'bleege t' be mouty keerful down yhere, son. Dis is a mouty tryin' time er de year an' you mus'n' be brash 'bout stayin' out arter sundown."

"Scipio," I said, following him with grateful eyes as he hovered about the hearth making things bright and tidy, "what's the news?" I hoped by that leading question to elicit something about last night's horror, if, indeed, it was not all a dream.

Scipio shook his head mournfully. "Ef rascality was news, son, I'd say 'news a plenty,' but rascality's mouty old 'bout yhere. Things is rank, I tell you."

"What's up now?"

"You better ask de manager dat question. He's jus' rarin' en snortin' about Yankee."

"About what?" I bawled, sitting bolt upright in bed.

"'Bout Yankee. Yankee's done gone, cyarn fin' hair nor hide uv him. You see, Yankee were he's own private prop'ty. En a finer head er stock never et grass on Crooked Creek. But he were a terrer to de neighborhood, en nuthin' shorter. Break fences! Why, sir, dat beas' could jus' nat'ally pick up a gate en walk off wid it, lak Samson done de golden gates. I don' keer w'at you do to him. You mout chain one

ho'n to he's huf; you mout fasten a bo'd over he's head; you mout run a stick frew he's nose; you mout do ennything you min' to; all de same, fus' thing you know Yankee he done got inter somebody peafiel' en tol' all de cattle in arter him. Folks done tired er Yankee, en he's gone, dat's all."

"Scipio," I said, feeling ready to embrace the entire world, "why did they call the brute Yankee?"

"Kase, you see, endurin' de war a transpo't was takin' beef cattle up to Vicksburg, and dis feller he fall overboard en swim out at Mr. Cooper's place."

I had no more questions to ask about these "fiends incarnate."

CHAPTER XIV.

A SEARCH AT MONTROSE.

SO EASY is it to fall into the ways of a neighborhood when one feels himself identified with it, that I detected myself speaking of, thinking of, and writing of the only remaining member of the Holcombe family as "Miss Nannie"; her husband, who was, presumably, also the possessor of a local habitation and a name being simply "Miss Nannie's husband" to everyone in the neighborhood who found occasion to refer to this adjunct of the old house.

As I came to be more familiar with local customs, I noticed this peculiarity in other cases. A married woman must move entirely out of the reach of her old associates before she could hope to be anything but "Miss Nannie," "Miss Betty," or "Miss Carrie," all of which is extraneous to the subject of this paper, and is meant simply to explain the constant omission of an unfortunate gentleman's name from the record. As "Mr. Telfair Forbes," he would have lost significance and identity. It was "Miss Nannie's husband" who wrote in answer to my letter of inquiry about a will, saying that his wife desired to refer me to Anarky. If there was a will, it must be somewhere in Mrs. Holcombe's room. Anarky, who had always been near that lady's person, knew better than anyone else where she kept her papers. I would please consider that letter my authority for examining the desk in Mrs.

Holcombe's room and reading the will, if one was found. As he was on the eve of departure for Cuba with his family, on account of his oldest son's health, neither he nor his wife could give the matter personal attention. She joined with him in regretting that so much unnecessary red tape was being used to prevent the close of a simple business transaction. As his wife was the only living member and undisputed heir of the Holcombes, her desire to dispose of the property should have been sufficient for all purposes. The question of a will had never occurred to them.

From his point of view "Miss Nannie's husband" was undoubtedly in the right, but, as I did not propose to divulge Mrs. Frazer's treachery until I was quite ready at all points, I had to leave myself under the imputation of red-tapism, a thing I hold in special abhorrence.

I had known for a long time that the large front room, corresponding to the parlor beneath, whose door had never been unlocked since my arrival, had been Mrs. Holcombe's bedroom. Scipio had over and over again repeopled every nook and cranny of the old house for me. He looked very solemn now, when I told him I was going to invade that hallowed spot, and that he and Anarky must be with me. I also, for several reasons, asked the business manager to be present on the occasion. "What for?" he asked, looking at me ungraciously across the supper table. "There ain't no manner of use about kicking up such a dust. This place belongs to Miss Nannie, and if you find a will, it'll just tell you the same thing over. As for me, I never did have any fancy for nosing round dead folks' things. I ain't so sure myself that the old lady didn't die of

yellow fever. Folks called it swamp fever, but she was as yellow as a pumpkin, and I've known the fever to be started before this by opening drawers and closets where woolen things have been packed away."

I was quite convinced that this was a bugaboo improvised for the occasion. The business manager preferred that I should wind up the legal points in syndicate matters and leave him in quiet possession of the field. From his point of view he was in the right, too, and in his eyes, also, I must for some time to come seem to be dallying causelessly with matters which required summary adjustment. I thought of Miss Ransom in connection with this necessary examination of the dead woman's effects. I wished that she and Anarky, her good friends in life, might be the only ones to handle the things invested almost with undue sacredness by the hallowing touch of death. But Miss Ransom was manifestly out of the question under the circumstances. Scipio and Anarky, therefore, must be my only coadjutors.

Anarky came arrayed as if for "meetin'." This unlocking of the room where "Mist'iss died" was a solemn and awe-inspiring ceremony, worthy of all the respect she would extend to "meetin'." "Ef you want me 'long too, son, I 'lows you'll haf ter wait till arter supper, 'cause I cyarn' git way fum de gin befo' dark," Scip had said. Of course I wanted Scipio along, so it was by the feeble light of a kerosene lamp that I finally invaded Mrs. Holcombe's room.

A dank, musty atmosphere, a quantity of solid, stately furniture, lofty ceilings, impenetrable by the feeble light of the lamp held high over Scipio's head, *was what* faced me when I passed over the threshold.

Scipio and Anarky walked in behind me on tiptoe. The faded carpet under their feet was sacred in their eyes.

"Anarky," I said, "you know what we have come here for. It may be that Mrs. Holcombe never wrote any will, but I want you to tell me, as well as you can recollect, just what happened the night that your mistress died."

At the side of the tall canopied bed, whose crimson damask tester made a dull spot of color overhead, was a little table. I directed Scipio to set the lamp down on it, and threw myself into a great chintz-covered armchair on the other side. No amount of persuasion on my part could induce them to make themselves equally comfortable. There was a damask towel (yellow now) thrown over the little table, on which was standing a flat blue jar, containing the brown and thorny stems of what had once been roses; a vial or two, the contents dried and blackened; a bunch of rusty keys, and a couple of books.

"Miss Nannie wouldn't 'low nothin' to be disturb," said Anarky, looking tenderly at the brown crumbs about the blue jar that told where the rose petals had fallen.

"Things is jes' like they was the night that Mist'iss died. That was a day, to be sho'. That was the very same day Miss Nannie burned the cotton."

I had often had occasion to notice Anarky's superiority to her husband in the matter of comparatively good English, which I attributed to the close companionship of mistress and maid.

"Before Mars Fraze and Mars Spence died, Mist'iss used sometimes to say, 'Anarky, when the boys come

home, if I ain't here, you tell them they won't need a lawyer to fix things up for them. I know my boys will do the right thing by each other and their sister.' You see, Mist'iss never believed Marse Fraze wurn' coming back. She thought he done quarrel with Miss 'Tildy and gone 'way to punish her. She took on mightily 'bout it at first, and I been hearin' her say over and over: 'He might have told me good-by.' But that was before my old man took Mist'iss to camp and back. After she come back she never said no more about lawyers nor nothin' like that, for you see it was all Miss Nannie's then."

"You were not in the room at the last moment?"

"No, sir; nobody but Miss 'Tildy Ransom were in the room when the last change come. I had gone with Miss Nannie up to the gin, to see if we couldn't get the soldiers to let ours alone. Them was rank times, sir, I tell you; and the night that Mist'iss lay there so white and still, looking like she was in for a good, restful sleep, we didn't need no lamplight in this room, it was just as broad as daylight with the flames from that burning cotton.

"We knowed the gin-burners was comin' our way, and Miss Nannie she said, 'Anarky, when they get here set out a lunch and keep them in the dining-room till I get there.' Well, sir, I done it, and while they set there eatin' 'way fur dear life—our own solgers mind you, and they was always hungry—Miss Nannie, she come in the room looking so white and sweet, seemed like a heart of stone might 'a' melted at sight of her.

"She told them she knewed it was the cotton they wanted 'stroyed, and if they would take her word of *honor for it,* she would have the cotton moved out of

the gin-house and the new crib and set fire to it with her own hand."

"There was seven hundred bales of it, son," Scipio here interpolated; "good heavy ties, and the machinery in that gin was mouty 'spensive. We couldn't give that up, you know."

"They look at Miss Nannie sorter dubiousome. They stop eatin' when she come in and stood up with their caps off and their arms hangin' straight down. One of 'em spoke up and said they must obey orders. 'Your orders are to burn all the cotton you find, are they not?' Miss Nannie asked, lookin' as straight and as proud as I don't know what. And when they said 'Yes,' then she said, looking 'em in the eye: 'I pledge you my word of honor as a lady, that if you will leave the buildings standing, I will set fire to the cotton with my own hand as soon as it can be removed. Nothing but willful malice can make you refuse me.'

"They all got red in the face and looked at her sorter steady. Finally one of 'em spoke up again and said: 'We will be back here by ten o'clock to-night, and if we discover that a single bale of cotton has been hauled off and hidden, the buildings must go.' Miss Nannie she flashed back at them and said: 'If you find a single pound has been saved from the fire, you can burn this house down over my dying mother's head.'

"Then they went away, and Miss Nannie she just dropped down in a chair all trembling like, and I thought for a little she was going to faint. But the Holcombes warn't never of the faintin' sort. She looked up at me, with her sweet mouth all a tremble, and said, 'Aunt An' (my chillun always call me Aunt

An') 'we'll have to work very hard to get it all out. Tell Scip to get the people together, and I'll meet them at the gin. I did hope we could save the cotton, for it's all we'll have to live on for a long time to come. You go ahead, and I'll come after I've told Tillie.' Miss Nannie and Miss 'Tildy Ransom was jus' wrap up in each other.

"Well, sir, with Mist'iss laying here, almost at her last gasp, Miss Nannie and me went up to the gin, where Scipio had put all the folks to work rolling the cotton bales out of the gin and the new crib, and Miss Nannie stood up and told what it all meant. She never said a hard word 'bout them low-live scamps that come here and eat our vittles, and was ready to burn the gin down by way of payin' for it. She told the folks it had to be done. It was to keep the enemy from gittin' it, and if you believe me, sir, I don't believe the Yankees was studyin' about comin' this fur out of their way to hunt up our cotton. But that didn't make no difference then; Miss Nannie's word was out, and she told them there wurn' a lock of cotton to be saved. If you believe me, sir, she made old Aunt Nancy Lee, who had pulled a apron full out uv one end of a bale, to cryard into knittin' yarn, put it back, smack into the flames. The word of a Holcombe meant something those days." (Anarky reared her head proudly just here.) "When the folks had got purty well ahead of her, Miss Nannie she took the lightwood torch out of my ol' man's hand there, and, with her teeth set hard and her eyes jus' a blazin', she walked from one bale to the other as steady and quite as if she was walking down the garden between *the rosebeds* and stuck the torch plum' into each one.

"Maybe there wurn' nuthin' said by the folks when the flames begin to lick up the cotton they'd worked over so hard! I tell you, sir, you'd 'a' thought judgment day was clost to hand, the way the men groan and the women cry and beg Miss Nannie for Gawd sake not to burn it all up. Some of the young fellers (the old ones would 'a' knowed better) told Miss Nannie if she'd let them 'lift some of the bales high over head so as not to leave no tracks of it in the dirt road, they'd hide it so that nobody on earth could find it. But Miss Nannie she jus' look at them in a way that made 'em hang their heads, and said, 'Boys, I promised.' And she had promised. That was enough for her. She didn't leave them till she'd stuck her torch into the last bale, neither. You see she mistrusted the boys would try to save some in spite her. I tell you the Holcombes, men and girls, was grit."

Anarky paused, and going over to a side-window she flung up the sash and opened the long-closed shutters.

"You ain' never look out of this window, son, is you? You can't see much to-night because the moon's on the wane. But yonder's the gin, and that burning cotton was spread out all in front of it. That's the light we laid Mist'iss out by."

I looked across the brown, bare fields to where the stately shaft of the gin-house rose high in air. It was cold and dark and still out there now, but I could almost see the girlish form of Anarky's Miss Nannie flitting about with the flaming torch in her hand, and the lurid flames lighting up the red damask tester over the tall-posted rosewood bed behind me, where the mistress of Montrose lay. Small wonder that this

lonely survivor should rebel against ever revisiting the scene of so much sorrow and suffering.

"And Mrs. Holcombe never said anything to you about a will?" I said, returning violently to the business in hand.

"No, sir," said the old woman, "but I knows agzakly where ol' Miss kept all her papers. She was mighty systematized, and I can open the very drawer for you where she used to sit and look over papers and read them, after Master died." She took the bunch of rusty keys from the little table by the bedside, and going to a quaint, old brass-mounted desk in a corner near the window, which she had just opened, she fitted the right key in the lock without the slightest difficulty, and laid the folding lid down for my convenience.

"I don't see what good me an the ol' man can do you, son, if you're goin' to look over all them papers, as you've got Miss Nannie's permit to do, and it sorter takes me back to times I'd ruther not think about no mo'. So, if you's willin', Scip and me will go now. I done showed you where Mist'iss kept all her papers, and if you don't find what you want there, its because it ain't nowhere. I lay I'll see Mist'iss all this blessed night."

It did seem like torturing needlessly these two faithful old souls to keep them in an atmosphere fraught with such melancholy reminders to them, so I dismissed them, resolving to satisfy myself that night, finally, as to whether Frazer Holcombe's existence under the name of Walter Frazer could in any way vitiate the syndicate's title to Montrose, in case of its purchase from "Miss Nannie."

I put the lamp on the lid of the desk, close in front

of me. Its feeble yellow flicker only partially illumined the satinwood drawers. The remainder of the spacious bedroom was lost in obscurity. After Scipio and Anarky left me, the house grew preternaturally still. I could hear them creak their way cautiously down-stairs in the dark, their clumsy shoes making a wooden clatter in spite of their precaution. I could hear them outside, as they passed around the corner of the house, conversing together earnestly, doubtless still talking about the night that "Mist'iss died." I drew out the drawer Anarky had indicated. It came with difficulty. The wood had swollen and the "dirt-daubers," those indefatigable little masons, had sealed it in various places. Their gray nests fell shattered as I jerked the drawer from its socket, scattering their "dust to dust" upon the dead woman's papers.

My search was not a very long one. The drawer was full of methodically arranged papers, which I left undisturbed after reaching the fourth one, whose indorsement assured me I was in possession of Mrs. Holcombe's last will and testament. By its conditions the Montrose mansion with a certain quantity of land was positively secured to the name of Holcombe either to her well-beloved son Frazer Holcombe or to Spencer Holcombe. The will had been made promptly after Colonel Holcombe's will had been admitted to probate; it had evidently been her desire to make final disposition of the property. It was evident also from the tenor of the instrument that Frazer Holcombe's adopted mother had felt no distinction between him and the boy Spencer. This was made still more apparent in the few lines, evidently written by her, and witnessed by my refractory neighbor Major Ransom,

after her return from the camp to which Scipio had taken her on her sad, fruitless errand. In this codicil, while admitting the bare possibility that her well-beloved son, Frazer, who had left his home mysteriously, might still be alive, she desired to testify to her "unabated affection for and confidence in him," by securing the home at Montrose to him and his heirs for ever, only to revert to her daughter in case of irrefragable proof of Frazer Holcombe's death.

This, then, settled the matter so far as my business interest in Mrs. Holcombe's will went. Montrose belonged to Frazer Holcombe, and Frazer Holcombe was alive! What a wide field of conjecture the reading of those few words had opened up to me! Here was I in full possession of the fact that a man who desired to be considered dead was very much alive, and the legal owner of a magnificent piece of property. I could readily predict Mr. Frazer Holcombe's, or Mr. Walter Frazer's line of conduct, when informed of the turn events had taken, which would be in due course of mail. I had reason to suppose this man to belong to the emphatically high-toned and absurdly unpractical class. Doubtless, in a few finely-turned sentences, he would relinquish all right and title to the estate of Montrose, but, as by the provision of Mrs. Holcombe's will it was secured to "him and his heirs for ever" (she never having taken into consideration the possibility of his resuming the paternal name, after she had bestowed upon him that of Holcombe by act of Legislature), there were future pitfalls to be guarded against and the machinations of a preëminently grasping mother to be taken into account.

Time had worn on while I had been sitting at

the desk. The chilly night air blew cold on my shoulders from the window Anarky had left open. I closed the desk, and, locking it, put the bunch of rusty keys back on the table strewn with the ashes of roses. I stood for a second looking out over the broad cotton-fields, where a soft white mist lay over the brown stubble. The waning moon had dropped out of sight behind the trees. I could hear a wakeful cock crow drowsily in the distant quarter-lot. I leaned out to draw in the shutter which had caught obstinately by its rusty fastening. The wet, leaf-strewn terraces lay dimly outlined beneath the window. Suddenly, noiselessly, brilliantly, the terrace leaped into full view; the white mist flashed rosy red; the sky was like an ebony vault, excepting where the dancing, glancing, joyous flames that leaped like prisoners unbound from every opening about the gin-house licked it with a thousand lurid tougues; once more the spacious chamber flashed in the light of the flames. I glanced nervously towards the sombre bed, almost feeling as if I must see its quiet sleeper. The Montrose gin-house was on fire. Instinctively I aroused the business manager. He was with me in a marvellously short time. There was nothing to do but watch it and pour out wordy maledictions. I did one. He did both. We could see innumerable dark forms hovering about the flames. Aimlessly, but restlessly, they were looking at the work of their own hands!"

"Accident!" said the business manager, snapping at me for my suggestion. "No, sir; it's one way a nigger takes to get even, and it will go hard with any one that can't prove he was in his cabin all this evening."

I thought of Scipio and trembled for him.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE RIGHT TRAIL.

TO OBTAIN a personal interview with Mr. Frazer Holcombe was the next thing to be done. To write and ask him to come to Montrose would be at once vain and indiscreet. He simply would not come, perhaps would not even answer my letter, and there would be another "hitch." I must go to him, and that without a note of warning beforehand. When I told the business manager at the breakfast-table the next morning, that I was going away to be gone perhaps several weeks, I thought a gleam of triumph shot from his small dull eyes into mine, across the molasses jug which he was holding at an unnecessary elevation over the egg-bread he was deluging with its contents.

"Gettin' nervous?" he asked, smiling disagreeably.

"Nervous about what!" I tried to look very dangerous as I gave him question for question in my sharpest tones.

"Nothing. I thought maybe you might be thinking it was Kuklux burned the gin last night, and comin' so close after that other rascally piece of business, 'most anybody that didn't know the country well might feel a little squeamish. But I'm acquainted with the sort of Kuklux that fired that gin and I'm on the track of 'em already. There was six or seven hundred dollars worth of seed sacked up in the seed-room of that gin, and the fools thought they'd hide the stealing of it by

burning down a $6,000 gin. If they'd give me warning," he added with grim facetiousness, "I'd 'a' moved the seed outside to accommodate them and saved the gin. But I'll run 'em to earth before I lay me down to sleep this night."

Just here I made a bungling effort to secure Scipio from unjust suspicion. "Scipio and Anarky were with me last night up to a quite late hour for them to be away from home," I said.

"Oh! they was, was they?"

This was said with so much suppressed malignity that I knew I had not mended matters at all for the old people. But, as I was only to be gone a few weeks, and some legal process would certainly be gone through with in the matter of the incendiaries, whoever they might be, I should be back in time to look after Scipio's interests. After all, the burning of the Montrose gin was altogether secondary to the finding of the Montrose heir. For Scipio's sake I did not care to antagonize his potent enemy unnecessarily. I smoothed out my voice and my temper sufficiently to ask pleasantly which would be the cheapest and the fastest route to Virginia from Crooked Creek.

"There ain't no fast and there ain't no cheap. What part of Virginny do you want to go to?"

"Richmond."

"Well, all I can tell you is to go from here to Vicksburg by boat, and then take the cars. You'll have to chance it for a boat. They're mighty irregular this time of year. Carrying cotton down they get behind time, and then the river's so low they just have to crawl along of foggy nights, fear of sand bars. If it was me wanting to get anywheres, I'd ride out to

Banks's and hail in the first up-going boat. You may hit one right off and you may have to wait two or three days."

"Wait where?"

"Right there at old Bankses."

"Does he keep a tavern?"

"Tavern! You better not offer to pay old Banks anything if you don't want to be showed the front door. You couldn't please old Banks better than by getting there when there wasn't a chance of a boat for a week to come. He's one of your sort."

Not knowing exactly what was meant to be conveyed in that last clause, whether it might mean that the hospitable Mr. Banks was a genius or a fool, I went about making my preparations for departure without any further consultation.

I had no opportunity on that occasion to decide what "sort" Mr. Banks was, as it was my good fortune to reach his landing just as an Anchor Line steamer was clumsily and deliberately chassezing around with a view to landing some barrels of meal. The Captain stood ready to fling a bundle of New Orleans papers at the head of a pudgy little man who was bawling a dozen questions in a breath at him, with apparent indifference to any reply. As he was the only white man visible on the shore, I set him down as Mr. Banks.

Monotony finds its climax in a trip up the lower Mississippi River. Here long stretches of cottonwoods and willows clothe the crumbling banks so densely as to leave the cultivated fields behind them purely conjectural. There an open space where one can see miles of carelessly tilled fields, with a more or

less shabby dwelling-house trying to hide behind its straggling shrubbery, to which appertain a lot of more or less shabby quarter cabins and the inevitable red-brick gin stack looming into prominence—a sameness, a dreariness, a dead level of hopeless but brave effort at making the best of a bad thing, that becomes stamped on the face of the land and its people. Our frequent landings occasioned only a slight acceleration of the local pulse. The note of warning which our steam whistle would send many minutes in advance of a stoppage would give the one white man of the place ample time to saunter deliberately down to the bank a-mule or a-horseback, where, with one leg thrown crosswise of his saddle-bow, he would limply absorb a few meagre items of news from the great stirring world without. Before the disgorgement of the boxes and barrels consigned to that point was complete, perhaps a dozen or more dark forms and faces would lend a touch of sombre color to this picture of still life. They might have no proprietary interest in the business on hand, but it was something to see the great "side-wheeler," like some mammoth white-winged bird, get slowly under way again, and with a fluttering of her paddle-wheels turn her prow up stream. It was worth standing there, in spite of the raw, wintry air, to watch her well out of sight. Perhaps they did not know themselves how much of the longing for companionship with the great human family went to make up that idle curiosity concerning this wood and iron link between them and the world.

Vicksburg did not tempt me to delay. I found it rather a dreary-looking place, with some few reminders of its stubborn seige in the shape of the earth

chambers excavated in the hillsides for the safety of women and children during the bombardment.

There is a certain low degree of worldly prosperity which a refined nature must always find vastly more depressing than the most abject poverty. Tatters and gaunt famine have possibilities of the picturesque in them, but that intermediate stage between poverty and competence which allows a small margin for the display of bad taste grates harshly upon the sensibilities. It was of Frazer Holcombe's sensibilities that I was thinking as I sat in his mother's parlor, waiting for her to redeem the promise to "be in terreckly," which she had sent me by a small colored person whose tatters had not reached the picturesque stage.

The room was small and the furniture looked as if it might have been bought in job lots at different auction sales. Bows of flimsy ribbon of gaudy hues caught back the plain muslin curtains, which were badly in need of the laundress. A faded red silk damask "recliner," worn into ravelings at the edges, boasting no family connection with the other upholstered articles, was placed where its faded glory might impose a first impression of elegance upon the visitor. There was an open bookcase before whose contents an extremely dusty curtain of crimson canton flannel was suspended. A handsome inkstand of gilt and cut glass was placed as a central ornament on the high mantel. The walls were hung thickly with pictures that puzzled me to the extreme of making me get up to examine them more closely. The largest one hung behind the inkstand over the open fireplace, before which a large palmetto fan had been hastily arranged to conceal the presence of dead ashes. My back being

thus turned to the door, I received my first impressions of Mrs. Walter Frazer through my ears. "There you are staring at that ridiculous berlin wool picture for all the world like you hadn't just left a house where my poor little pictures wouldn't even be thought fit for firewood."

These challenging words were followed by a ringing laugh. I faced about abruptly, and bowed humbly. I confess to being thrown completely out of my calculations. The lady's letter had prepared me for an ignorant woman; her parlor had prepared me for a vulgar one, but nothing had prepared me for the burst of splendor that illumined that dingy little room when she entered it. I had expected to come in contact with a faded and elderly worn beauty of the ring, who had put far away from her even the memory of the days when she was found unworthy to shelter her own baby from contamination and adjusted herself to the new conditions. Elderly, of course, she was, as was witnessed on her cheeks and in the corners of her eyes in spite of the "make-up" that had kept me waiting full half an hour. Worn, too, but the full suit of brown hair that rippled in girlish ringlets over her forehead, beneficently concealed the ravages of time. Her form was simply superb, and in her liquid brown eyes and ravishing smile I thought I could trace the secret of the senior Walter Frazer's fatal ensnarement.

She was dressed in a dark blue calico, which she had donned so hastily that she had skipped several of the buttonholes, but her haste had not precluded her adorning both taper wrists with heavy gold bangles,

doubtless, I harshly concluded, the cherished souvenirs of some equestian triumph.

"I know you've got good news to tell me," she said, seating herself on the damask recliner, and pitching her confident words in a painfully high key, "for you never would have gone to all the expense and trouble of coming all the way here just to tell me the old lady didn't do nothing for my poor Wallie."

"I came on here, madam," I answered, "because I find a personal communication with Mr. Frazer Holcombe absolutely necessary."

Mrs. Frazer brought her finely pencilled eyebrows angrily together over a pair of splendid eyes, which time had been powerless to mar. In spite of her visible irritation, however, she discovered that the turquoise ornament on one of her bracelets might be more effectively placed, and gave it a spiteful twitch as she said peevishly:

"If you are going to work that way, the fat's all in the fire. I tell you, Walter won't have a thing to do or to say about the Holcombe property. I thought if there was anything coming to Wallie, you could just turn it into ready money and send it to me. That's the only way he'll ever get the benefit of one red cent. You could do it that way, now, couldn't you?"

Mrs. Frazer asked this with her elaborate coiffure held slightly to one side, and with a smile that, when the face it wreathed had been young and abloom with natural roses, must have been very seductive indeed. She did not look at all like a woman conscious of having wrecked life for two men. I had to insist very strenuously that the business I had come there to transact could be transacted with her son alone.

"If Mr. Holcombe is in the house, Mrs. Frazer, I would like to see him at once, as my time is limited."

"Of course he's not in the house," she said tartly; "what should he be doing in the house at this time of the day, when he has to work like a darky from nine o'clock until five, and him raised a perfect gentleman?"

"Then I shall have to look for him at his place of business," I said, taking up my hat and satchel, "if you will kindly direct me."

"Oh, it won't be hard to find him. There ain't but three other stores in town. Wallie's in McCracken's bookstore."

That had rather a promising sound. Mrs. Holcombe's adopted son might have met with a worse fate than having to stand behind the counter of a bookstore. I had come as fast as steam could fetch me from Richmond to this little Virginia hamlet, which was scarcely more than a railway station, and I did not propose to waste any more time there than was absolutely necessary.

Mrs. Frazer followed me to the parlor door, no farther. I think she did not care to have the penetrating sunlight fall upon her from the open front door. She looked at me anxiously as she said: "Of course, you won't let Wallie know about my letter?"

"Of course not, madam."

"And maybe you'd better not let him know you've seen me. The Frazers are a queer lot. I don't know what makes the boy stick to me so close; it can't be for love of me. I sometimes think he'd better have gone his way and let me go mine. Though I'm getting on in years and they'd 'a' been taking up some new favorite, I reckon, the public's mighty capricious.

If you haven't never seen Wallie, you'll think him awful stiff, I know."

It wasn't hard to find McCracken's, but it was somewhat disappointing when found. The bookstore in which Frazer Holcombe was at work contained a minimum of books and stationery and a maximum of cheap toys and untempting candies in jars. Business did not seem to be very brisk when I stopped in front of its one window, which was devoted to the exhibition of some new slates, a box of water-color paints, some India-rubber balls, and a few fly-blown copies of illustrated newspapers strung along a string. A red-faced man with his hat pushed very far back on his head and his chair tilted back on its hind legs against the outer wall of McCracken's establishment looked lazily up at me from an open book that was supported by his two knees as I stopped before that imposing window. "Can I do anything for you, sir?" he asked in a pleasant, lazy voice.

"I am looking for a gentleman—Mr. Frazer—Hol——"

"Walter Frazer, my clerk; just step inside, sir." He dropped his eyes on his book once more, and I "stepped inside."

What I found inside was a comfortable looking colored dame on one side of the counter engaged in an animated discussion with an uncomfortable-looking colored boy who had to stand on the tips of his ten bare toes and grasp the edge of the counter rigidly with his little black claws in order to obtain a good view of the metallic glories spread out on the counter, touching the respective merits of a *blue tin* horse with a yellow tin saddle confined to its

metallic spine by a crimson tin surcingle, and a spotted tin cow on wheels. On the other side of the counter was a young man who, of course, must be Frazer Holcombe. He barely glanced at me as I entered. In that one glance I discovered that he had inherited his mother's superb eyes; but in his case they were set in a face of extreme refinement and pallor.

"You see, boss, I done promise Jo I'd give him somethin' purty ef he'd keep de chickens out de truck patch while I was in de fiel', an' I boun' to keep my promise. Which you like bes', sonny?"

She held the gorgeous horse and the no less gorgeous cow aloft over Jo's woolly head. Jo finally decided in favor of the cow, and the young man behind the counter proceeded to do it up in a piece of coarse brown paper. I wondered, while I watched this man dropping the change slowly into the fat outstretched hand of his dusky customer, explaining the name and value of each coin as he did so, why he had not chosen to put his hand to a plough out under the clean pure skies, instead of earning his bread in this sordid fashion. I stepped forward eagerly as soon as his customer left him free to attend to me.

"Mr. Holcombe!" I said.

He started violently, but no more so than I did. I had not meant to bungle so in my approach, but it was involuntary. "Pardon me, but you must know that I have been searching for you so long that I could not afford to risk another interruption. I am here for the sole purpose of communicating with you on a matter of grave importance. I want you to name an hour when you will meet me in my room at the Station

House. I am just from Crooked Creek. I must talk with you this evening."

He had never once taken his burning eyes off my face since I began to talk. I had feared he would decline holding parley with me. On the contrary he said with almost nervous eagerness:

"Will five o'clock be convenient for you? I regret that I am not able to offer you better accommodations than the Station House, but——"

"Five o'clock will suit me admirably," I hastened to say. "You won't fail me?" I held my hand out to him over the tin toys; he grasped it in one that felt hot and dry. "I shall not fail you," he said with an inexpressibly sad smile, and I left him replacing the tin horse and cows on their respective shelves.

I went back to the den I had secured at the station; there was nothing to allure me from it. I occupied the time that must elapse before I could have my talk with Frazer Holcombe in writing home. I think my soul was full of a sort of contempt for this man who, with brains and brawn and reasoning faculties all in normal condition, could find nothing better to do in such an active world than to stand behind a counter and sell tin horses to little woolly-headed darkies. With finite justice I arraigned him before the bar of my own prejudices and found him guilty of pusillanimity, and, being unable to pass any severer sentence upon him, I called him "a typical Southerner"; which contributed largely to any mental relief.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAPTAIN'S STORY.

THE railway system as it existed in Virginia at the period these papers deal with, had not reached perfection. Speed and regularity being the accepted criterion of excellence in railway management, the trains that passed through that country were open to criticism. This being the case, the man who permitted himself to be left by one of these leisurely public conveyances became an object of ridicule to his fellows and of contempt to himself.

The south-bound train was deliberately moving out from the shabby station where I was "putting up" for my limited stay in this obscure place, as I stepped upon the low platform that ran along the front of it. The stationmaster was looking after it with his hands thrust into the pockets of a pair of rusty jeans trousers. A colored porter, holding in one hand a flabby mail-bag which suggested the possible existence of more people somewhere in the neighborhood, was assisting the stationmaster in his arduous undertaking of watching the train safely out of sight. Three small barefooted apple-merchants, who had evidently received more snubs than pennies for the vociferous zeal with which they had cried the merits of their wares to the insensate occupants of the train, were exchanging commercial views touching the meanness of white folks in general. A cloud of dust which had been rapidly

whirling towards the station suddenly settled, and gave to view an unhappy-looking mule, whose unhappy-looking driver had lashed him into a lather for the benefit of an unhappy-looking occupant of the buggy to which it was harnessed.

"Somebody left!" said the stationmaster, immediately putting his hat, hands and voice voluntarily at the service of the belated train-catcher. "Somebody lef'," the colored porter echoed sympathetically, wildly waving the attenuated mail-bag over his head, as he yelled "Hold on dar! Somebody lef'!" The three ebony apple-merchants took up the refrain and ran hooting and bawling after the deliberately moving train, at a rate of speed which in a quarter race might have crowned their woolly heads with the victor's laurels. The train kept slowly on its appointed way, gradually accelerating its pace until the pitch of danger to an indiscreet cow that was grazing along the track had been reached, when, with a shriek of warning that rang mockingly through the forest trees on both sides of the road, it rushed out of sight just as the disappointed applicant for a seat therein sprang angrily from the buggy to the station platform with a smart-looking travelling-bag in his hand.

"Derby — tweed cutaway — gripsack — commercial traveller." I had reached this stage of conviction concerning the man who was left before I caught a glimpse of his face. It was a very wrathful face about that time.

"You exasperating old humbug!" he was saying savagely to the meek driver of the unhappy mule. "You told me last night to leave it all to you, and you would have me here a half-hour before train-time. *Now* what have you got to say? Tell me that, sir."

"Well, you see, boss, I warn' calculatin' on drivin' ol' Ned then. Ol' Ned's de slowes' mule on de place, but de mar' she got in de co'nfield las' night, an' I ain't fin' her yit. 'Sides dat, de breakin' uv dat trace sot us back some, an' havin' to go roun' by Pebbly Crick warn' in my calculashun. We didn't miss her by much."

This cheerful view of the situation only tended to inflame the traveller's wrath, and he began to grow really apoplectic about the temples. The station-master smiled, and the porter indemnified himself for long abstinence by a burst of explosive laughter. The apple-merchants evidently regarded the possibility of active hostilities with a keen relish. Something in the man's profile and the way his head was set on his shoulders emboldened me to advance and lay a hand on his arm.

"Brown?" I said tentatively.

"Yes, my name is Brown, what in the——Halsey?"

The wrath died suddenly out of his face as we laid violent hands on each other. I think his driver considered me a direct interposition of Providence. "What are you doing here?" Brown asked.

"Not waiting for a train," I answered, "but, as you haven't any chance now until to-morrow morning, you may as well come with me to my room. I'll be going your way myself to-morrow, perhaps. Isn't this worth losing a train for?"

I had not seen Brown since our college days. He was a good many years my senior. In fact, I had been his fag at school, but such a very well-treated one that he had always retained my warm affection. I knew his experience had been wide and varied since

our paths had led in different directions, and I rejoiced in the prospect of such good company during the long afternoon that had to be gone through before I could have my uninterrupted conversation with Frazer Holcombe.

"What brought you to this part of the country?" I asked, installing him in the only chair in my room, while I took possession of the side of the bed.

"Prospecting. I'm on the lookout for a home in the South. Somebody sent me here on a wild-goose chase, and now I'm taking myself to Florida on another one, I guess. The fact is, I'm out of my beat. I want to procure a home in a mild climate for my mother, but, as far as I can make out, mildness and mosquitoes are invariable concomitants. I am willing to pay if I can get what I want. But I don't know how to find it!"

"Go back with me," I said. "Almost every other man in the country wants to get rid of his plantation, and small blame to them. They are debt-ridden and heart-sick. They have no capital to run their places with, and the credit system winds them up double quick."

"Go back where with you?"

"To the Crooked Creek neighborhood, as it is called. Back from the river in Mississippi. Lands rich, climate superb, nice people—you couldn't do better for yourself or your mother."

"Crooked Creek!" Brown repeated dreamily, and his eyes gradually contracted until I could just see a narrow slit of brown between his long lashes. It was as if he had turned his sight inward to throw some light upon his memory. "Crooked Creek! You

know I commanded a transport at one time during the war and I remember once, on a down trip from Vicksburg——"

"Brown, Vicksburg? Idiot—Miss Mary Maxwell's Captain! Why didn't I make the connection myself?" I said bouncing from the bedside excitedly; "but then, you know, Brown is such an infernally common name that I never once thought of fastening it on you."

"You are a trifle unintelligible, my boy," said Brown, opening his eyes wide to look at me frigidly, as he used to do in the old fagging days, when I had displeased him; "but I suppose your meaning is clear to yourself. Would it be impertinent to inquire what there is to fasten on me?"

I had gone ahead entirely too fast. If this man had really only amused himself during the war at Miss Maxwell's expense, what right had I to suggest that she still remembered him kindly? If, on the other hand, and I didn't want to think badly of Brown, there had been some good reason for his not keeping his promise to go to see her after the war, what a pity to lose such a golden opportunity to straighten matters out! I walked up and down my cramped little room genuinely perplexed as to what to say or unsay.

"Brown gave me the cue himself. If you are located in the Crooked Creek neighborhood, of course you have seen Miss Maxwell, and, having seen her, of course you have found her as irresistible as other fellows have. I fell a victim to her ensnarements myself once, and risked a good deal for her sake. Fortunately I did not risk offering her myself."

"Why fortunately?" I asked, planting myself squarely before him. "Do you mean that you found out her father was a negro-trader?"

"I knew that before she left my boat," Brown answered; "she was a singularly candid young lady. But you know I had no prejudices of that sort to combat."

"Yes, she is very candid and very charming at the same time. I don't know why it is that she always makes me think of a fine, clear specimen of amber, with all its electric qualities."

"Amber with the fly of deceit deeply embedded in it," said Brown, giving an ugly twist to my poor comparison.

"A nobler woman than Mary Maxwell, the negro-trader's daughter, does not live," I said stoutly.

Brown narrowed his eyes again and pulled fiercely at his mustache, as he answered me in a voice of concentrated passion:

"You are further gone even than I was seven years ago if you can say that a woman who could go deliberately to work to ensnare the lover of her friend, compelling the poltroon to flee from the entanglement, has a proper conception of womanly purity."

"You are talking about Frazer Holcombe and Miss Ransom?"

"Yes."

"There's not a word of truth in it."

"Will you undertake to prove that?" he asked. I thought the eagerness of his manner augured well for Miss Maxwell's future chances if I could only convict him of gross injustice.

"First of all," I said, complacently putting on the

thumbscrews, "I want to know how you got hold of that malicious lie."

"It is a long story," he said impatiently, "too long to tell."

"Nevertheless, I must have every word of it before I say another word about Miss Maxwell or her affairs."

I brought out my cigar-box, put it on the front of the bed, and settled myself comfortably to hear the Captain's story.

"I think it was about the third trip I made down the river after landing Miss Maxwell and her mother, at the risk of losing my boat, that I was ordered to land and burn any cotton I might find on the banks between Vicksburg and New Orleans. This order did not disturb me very much, for I did not suppose I should find any at all. Yet it was a commission I did not relish, for, as far as I could see, these poor rebels whom we were winding up pretty rapidly would have nothing to start on again but the cotton they contrived to save in spite of us and their own gin-burners. My orders were to have enough picked sharpshooters on board to protect the men in the yawl, who should be sent ashore to fire the cotton. Of course, they were not to prowl any distance from the banks.

"The river was pretty high, and with a strong glass it was easy enough to see as big a thing as a cotton-bale a good way off. Things looked desolate you may depend, on both sides that river. Nothing to see by day but fields grown up in weeds, and occasionally at night the dismal landscape would be illuminated by a burning gin that some fellow had set fire to to keep us

from getting the cotton. Phew! it gives me a turn now to think of those days.

"The *Latona* (that was my transport's name) had got pretty well down the river with no call to land, and I began to hope I might slip on down to New Orleans without seeing any cotton to burn, when my lookout called to me to come to the glass.

"'What do you see?' he asked, putting the glass in my hand. What I did see was a mite of a frame house, sitting back in a little flower garden, a pile of four bales of cotton in full view on the bank in front of it, and a female standing guard over it. I could not vouch for the age or beauty of that female, because a great clumsy calico sun-bonnet eclipsed all of her above the shoulders. A gaunt white dog was lying at her feet. I swept the entire landscape with my glass, but that woman and that dog were the only living things in sight. 'Do you see their boat,' the lookout asked, while I still held the glass to my eye, 'down there hidden in the willows?' Then I scanned the willows, and could discern a long flat drawn into the thickest of them and fastened by a rope. My orders were peremptory. There was nothing for it but to obey them. I handed the glass back to the lookout. It was his province to keep a keen watch and notify the sharpshooters in case any 'rebs' should spring from ambush on us who were going to land. I got in the boat with four good oarsmen and pulled for the shore. They landed me immediately opposite that little pile of cotton. I walked towards it, trembling as I had never trembled before the belched fire of a battery.

"The woman pushed her sun-bonnet slightly back as I raised my hat, and I could see that her hair was

gray. She looked hard at me, with a pair of burning black eyes. She was an elderly woman, thin and worn, looking as if she was bearing her own full share of the burden her people were staggering under. She twisted her bonnet-strings into cords with her left hand, while I was walking towards her. There was a catch in her breath as she spoke directly to the point without wasting any words. 'You've come to burn my cotton, young man, haven't you? There it is, all in a heap. The boys just slipped in to try to run it across the river because I sent them word we was about out of everything, and the gunboat was down about Banks's. It won't help your Government along much to burn those four bales of cotton, but it will take all I've got in the world to live on, Milly and me.'

"I deplored the necessity I was under, and explained to her, as gently as I could, the rigid nature of a military command. 'You're going to burn it in spite of me, are you?' Her right hand, which had up to this time hung limply by her side, hidden under her apron, was suddenly raised, and in it she held a clumsy horse-pistol. Her arm trembled, but her aim never swerved. I moved hastily to one side. What if the men on the boat should see the action and fire on this desperate woman? 'In God's name, what are you about?' I called out 'I'm going to shoot you,' she said, slowly and deliberately. 'I've borne all it's in human nature to bear. I can't bear any more. Your men yonder may tear me limb from limb if they want to, but if you stick that match in that cotton, I will pull this trigger, so help me heaven.' The situation was embarrassing. I could not close in a hand-to-hand tussle with a feeble old woman. I stooped confusedly

and plucked a little purple wild flower that was blooming at my feet. I don't know why I did it.

"'Do you like flowers?' she asked, in a slow, pathetic voice. 'Then come with me,' she added. Naturally, I hesitated. There might be some trap laid for me. 'I don't mean you any harm. Just come with me, please.' There was no resisting the pathos of her voice, or the imploring look on that worn face. I followed her, and she led the way into the tiny flower garden, bright with annuals. 'This way,' she said, impatiently, moving around the corner of the house, 'the brightest zinnias are in the back yard.' I followed closely on her heels. She seemed to have cast a spell over me. The small back yard was as clean as earth could be. In the center of it was a round bed that was ablaze with zinnias and dahlias of every hue. 'Pull them, if you want to,' she said, curtly, 'they are Milly's flowers. There's Milly. Maybe she won't care for them long.'

"I followed the direction of her burning eyes. Lying on a bed which was on a level with the low window-sill was a girl. Her face was white and wan, and her eyes were closed. 'I sent word to the boys, my boys, that Milly was sick; that there was an English fellow just across the river buying up cotton, and that if we could get ours across I might get some stuff for Milly. We'd 'a' made it, too, if you'd been an hour later. That's all.' She turned away from me and heaved a sigh as if she was tired, soul and body. My heart was full of trouble and sympathy. I followed her and imprudently held out some greenbacks. It was a clumsy thing to do.

"'What's that?' she asked sharply.

"I hurriedly explained that it might procure what her daughter needed. Her sallow face flushed redly.

"'Take money from an enemy to buy medicine for Milly? It would poison her. I was sorter crazy when I pointed that pistol at you, young man. Go on, burn the cotton; I won't even look at you. It would not have helped Milly any to get myself into trouble.' She sat down on the floor of her low back gallery and folded her patient hands on her lap. She had nothing more to say to me. I looked once more at the pallid face on the pillow inside the house. Then I went back to where the gaunt dog was still lying by the four bales of cotton. My orders remained unchanged. The pallor of that sick girl's face, the pathos of her mother's voice, had no bearing whatever on them. My orders were to burn every bale of cotton I found on the river bank. I called to my oarsmen and made them arrange the pile according to my wishes, then ordered them back to the yawl. I stooped and placed a small pile of dried sticks beneath the cotton and applied the match. Then, on the run, I regained the yawl. I had carried out my orders. I had set fire to the cotton. If the fire should go out, I did not care to be a witness of it. Once more on deck, I took the glass and turned it on the little cottage. The woman in the sun-bonnet was on her knees drawing the burning sticks away from the smoking bales. 'Thank God!' I said aloud. 'Thank God for what?' the lookout asked. I answered without relinquishing the glass. 'That we got away from there before any bushwhackers rode up.' I think the lookout set me down for a coward after that. But I don't care, if Milly got her medicine."

Brown had got just that far, when they came up to tell me "Mr. Frazer" was down-stairs, and I had to wait until we went to bed that night to hear the rest and to find out what it all had to do with Miss Maxwell.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LESSON IN CHARITY.

THERE were two courses open to me in dealing with my "typical Southerner," now that I had unearthed him. The one was to meet him on frigid business grounds, with a view simply to securing the syndicate I represented against any annoying complications in the future. The other, to make an effort to reinstate Frazer Holcombe in the social position he had forfeited through no ill-doing of his own, which clearly was *not* my business.

If I had been older, or more coldblooded, there would have been no such pulling and hauling of common sense against sentiment. I think it was principally on Miss Matilda Ransom's account that I was so anxious to see Frazer Holcombe back at Montrose. I did not ignore the fact that Major Ransom and Mrs. Frazer would be serious impediments to their matrimonial venture, but after all they had endured I hoped they would be able to take a practical view of those drawbacks to the felicity I was officiously mapping out for them.

I was engaged in planning my mode of attack on Mr. McCracken's clerk when Brown was so unexpectedly precipitated on the scene of action. I confess, therefore, to being wholly unprepared for the point-blank frankness with which Mr. Holcombe plunged into the subject. "I think I was so startled this morning," he

said, "that I could not properly gauge my own surprise. I have not heard myself called Holcombe now for eight years. I am opposed to circumlocution in any matter, so we will dispense with it on the present occasion. I imagine you have come to see me about the sale of the Holcombe property, erroneously supposing that I have some interest in the matter. You are mistaken. I have none whatever. Of course, I am indebted to my mother for the betrayal of my whereabouts. No one else can have informed you. She urged me to communicate with you when I read in the papers that Montrose was to be sold. I am sorry now that I did not, for it would have saved you the trouble and expense of an utterly useless trip."

He had evidently made himself up for this interview. His calmness of feature was too palpably artificial, and his delivery too purely mechanical. We were sitting opposite each other at a small pine table, into which he had been jabbing his penknife nervously while talking.

"What would you have said if you had written?" I asked.

"That," he answered, as he took from his breast-pocket and laid open on the table before me a piece of paper on which he had written a full and concise renunciation of any claim he might be supposed to hold against the Holcombe estate. It was signed Walter Frazer.

"But that is not your own name," I said, putting my finger on the signature; "you were Mrs. Holcombe's legally adopted heir, and you cannot play fast and loose with an act of Legislature in any such fashion. Moreover, Mrs. Holcombe has devised the

manor-house and grounds immediately adjoining it to her well-beloved son Frazer, in a codicil written after your departure from Crooked Creek. It was her desire that the name of Holcombe should be always recognized as a power in the neighborhood. Are you prepared to deal so coldly and slightingly by you mother's wishes?"

"My mother!" He looked at me steadily for a second, then dropped his head with a groan on his folded arms.

"Yes, your mother," I said quickly, following up my advantage—"the woman from whom you absorbed all your ideas of right and wrong, of honor and dishonor; the woman who taught you how to despise all that was low and despicable, and whose wishes are entitled to your respect above and beyond that of any other mortal; your true mother, who guarded your interests carefully, even when you had left her stunned and bewildered by your inexplicable departure."

"Inexplicable to her—then—but not to you—now. You know all about it. I knew you could only have found me by first finding my mother." He was leaning back in his chair then, and an inexpressibly bitter look had come into his gloomy eyes. "Poor woman. She hoped to mend matters by writing to you, but she has only made them worse—far worse."

"I can't see it," I said, impulsively laying my hand on his arm. "I know I am transcending my rights as simply a lawyer in this case; but—but—hang it all, what's the use of being afraid to speak out? I've been an inmate of Montrose now for months. Old Scipio has been my almost constant companion. So you see I couldn't help hearing your story, and—

and—" I watched him narrowly; it was just possible I might be going too far, and my typical Southerner might deal with me in some summary fashion. "I know Miss Matilda Ransom. I have been an eye-witness of her daily struggles with poverty and her incomparable heroism." I paused, as much for a fresh supply of breath as anything else.

"Go on," he said hoarsely, and sat there drinking in every word I said.

"And I can't help thinking," I said, audaciously, "that if you would only go back and take your place as the head and owner of Montrose, you might rent the plantation from the syndicate and make a good living from it. And—and—Miss Ransom, unless I've read her all wrong, is just the sort of woman you would dare make a clean breast to, with the expectation of being helped, and strengthened, and understood."

"You have not read her wrong," he said, with that inexpressibly sad smile of his, and for a second he looked as if his chilled soul was basking in the bright possibility I had conjured up. Then he uttered the word "Impossible" in a tone that wrung my heart, and the clouds settled over his face heavier than ever.

"She does not know about my mother's letter, does she? She believes I am dead, does she not?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't know what she believes. She does not talk about her own affairs. Everyone but Scipio has given you up for dead, I presume."

"Poor old Scip! Honest, faithful old Scip! It would be worth a great deal to me to look into his face once more."

"There is no good reason why you should not," I said briskly.

"You—don't—know—what—you—are—talking about, young man. What I have done must stand. It cannot be undone. You are only wasting your time here. I will renounce all claims to the property in the name of Frazer Holcombe, if must be, and I shall have to trust to Nannie's generosity to keep my secret. As far as everybody else is concerned, they will be just where they were before. I am a dead man to all intents and purposes."

"And you can settle down," I said, with a burst of the most impertinent indignation, "to stand behind the counter in a hole like the one I found you in this morning, selling tin trumpery to little darkies—you, with your appearance, your strength, your talents, your acquirements? It's preposterous, you know." To this tirade I subjoined a spluttering apology, for I could see the angry blood mounting to his thin temples.

"I suppose you mean it all kindly," he said, with a sort of dogged patience that was much harder to witness than the hottest wrath, "and that's the main thing. I know how you all talk at the North. I know exactly the sort of criticism that is expended upon the men who were young when the war closed. There isn't a man among you but what thinks he could have managed better than we've done. There is nothing easier than criticism. But come, let us go over the list of my *dis*qualifications you have just given. 'Appearance' has nothing whatever to do with it, unless, indeed, I might go North and turn a few honest pennies by posing to some artist as a model for Lazarus at

the gate of Dives. 'Strength'? What shall I expend it upon? As a field laborer? I should be incompetent. As an artisan? I have no skill. As a hod-carrier? There's no demand for them. You will say, 'Emigrate; the world is large.' To emigrate requires ready cash. 'Talents'? That would indicate the possibility of entering one of the professions. That requires long and costly preparation. Who will make bread for my mother and for me while I am getting ready to make my talent available? 'Acquirements'? what do they consist of? A smattering of Greek and Latin, a knowledge of horsemanship, and the ability to cut a good figure in polite society. I might impart my Greek and Latin—to whom? I might turn Turvey-drop and give lessons in deportment. But I'm afraid it would have to be gratuitous instruction."

"Do you suppose," he added, "that I have not turned this thing over and over and looked at it in every possible light? Those of us who went into the army when we were mere boys were called 'the seed-corn of the country.' Fate ordained that we should turn out to be mere suckers. I suppose if we'd had any 'grit,' any 'go,' or any of the other things our judges decree us lacking in, we should have learned by this time to have made our bricks without straw. If I were alone in the world—bah! what twaddle. Here, you are a lawyer. Make out a document that will settle this matter at once, will you? I am opposed to looking backwards. It isn't healthy nor hopeful."

He got up and strode restlessly backward and forward while I was formulating his renunciation of all claims to the Montrose property. It was not in my province to insist any further. "If that was my mother," I

was saying to myself as the pen flew over the paper, "I should dispose of her where she could not impose her disagreeable personality upon my wife, go back to Montrose and marry Miss Ransom." But some people are constitutionally fitted for self-crucifixion, and I believed that gaunt young man, under whose restless feet the loose planks of the floor were then quivering, was one of them. Queer, how many trains of thought one can carry on simultaneously! While I was making out that legal document, with its full complement of "whereases" and "be it knowns," disposing of the obnoxious Mrs. Frazer and marrying my hero and heroine off in true novel style, I was candidly acknowledging to myself that if I had been reared as that boy had been I should have been dazed, too. When I submitted the paper for his inspection he read it carefully.

"I shall write to Nannie myself," he said, as he took up the pen to sign his name. He did not do it at once, however. "I should have liked," he said slowly, looking at me wistfully—"I should have liked very much to have made over all my rights to—Miss Ransom. But I suppose that would not do!"

He threw down the pen after signing his name and stretched his hot hand across the table to me. "I am quite sure you won't gossip about my affairs, and I thank you for all the unprofessional sympathy you've thrown in. It's hard not to be at liberty to send back one word of greeting to—any of them, not even my poor, faithful old Scip. I am sorry you have been put to so much trouble and expense causelessly."

I watched him as he walked away down the railway track in the direction of his home, thinking that if it

was ever possible for a man to be too conscientious by half, Frazer Holcombe had achieved it. The station-master came up behind me, where I stood in the front door looking after the rapidly lessening figure.

"You know Frazer?" he said, with the easy familiarity of his neighborhood, which was not, however, devoid of courtesy.

"Not before to-day. I had some business to transact with him."

"I'd like to hear of something good happening to Wallie. He's got a hard row to travel. The Frazers used to be somebody in these parts. The father of that boy was one of the best friends I ever had. It's true he was the son of the richest man in the county, and my father was only the doctor, but that didn't make any difference. We went through Harvard side by side. We both planned to turn the world upside down; but then, you know, we didn't calculate on the world being turned inside out in our time. The father of that boy had the prettiest start in the world. Don't know what did become of him finally. It seems he got rid of everything he had in the world, but that miserable little shanty Wallie and the old lady live in. It used to be a meetin'-house for the Frazer darkies. The Frazers used to own every foot of land about this station for four miles. I tell you people opened their eyes when Wallie came here to live after the war. You see, we'd never heard of his existence. And as for the old lady! She was a sockdologer! She was a different sort of Mrs. Frazer from what this county was used to. I reckon she's something of a millstone about the boy's neck, but nobody ever hears a word of complaint from him—not even about her opium

bills. He makes his own vegetable garden and mends his own shoes. If he had a mind that way, he could marry Miss Fanny Dangerfield and take life easier."

"Who is Miss Fanny Dangerfield?" I asked, experiencing a twinge of jealous wrath on Miss Ransom's account.

"She's old Dangerfield's daughter. Dangerfield was overseeing on the place when this boy's father came into possession. He warn't married then. People say Frazer gambled the place off to his overseer. I don't know how that is, but they used to have some awful bouts up there. Frazer went off to New Orleans suddenly, and the next we heard of him was this boy coming here with that old dowd. Dangerfield's son is studying medicine in Europe now, and Frazer's son is clerking for old McCracken at $30 a month. I was thinking if you were a lawyer and Wallie's friend, you might put him up to making old Dangerfield show his vouchers. It looks suspicious, the old man's anxiety to bring Wallie and Miss Fanny together. Miss Fanny ain't averse."

"But I understood you to say you were a lawyer."

"*Was!*" the stationmaster said with an easy laugh. "But that was before the war. After I came out of the fight, I'd have starved to death on my profession. There's no litigation now, sir; there's squabbles over a mule, or a pig, or something like that. I'm among the has-beens. They're as thick as hops about here. I've got a brother—he was studying medicine under pa when the thing broke out. He's a brakeman now on a railroad, and a good brakeman, too," he added with his jolliest laugh. "We're not dead yet by a long shot."

I looked at him admiringly. I should have liked to offer to shake hands with him, but feared it might strike him as a piece of patronage.

"Where do the Dangerfields live?" I asked.

"Straight up that lane," he said, pointing. "In the very home this boy's great-grandfather built. It's worth a trip up that way to cross the old battlefield where your folks and ours had a tolerably hot tussle. Maybe your friend would like to go with you." I called up to Brown through the open window and suggested a walk. He came down yawning and protested against having his nap broken into.

"What do you propose to show me?"

This I did not exactly know myself. It was not a picturesque locality—brown, bare fields, given over to weeds and brambles; drying-sheds, with the year's tobacco crop hanging stiffly from their roofs by their stems; a few listless toilers in turnip or potato-patches. Nothing more stirring in prospect.

"If you want to see our veteran," said the stationmaster, with a ring of local pride in his voice, "turn off at the first gate after you pass Dangerfield. There's pluck for you! It's old Captain Fairfax. Your folks didn't leave him a leg to stand on, but he can turn off the best brand of 'imported Havanas' as fast as chain lightning. We consider the Captain one of our successes. Sweet little girl there, too. Look out for your hearts, but be sure to buy some of the Captain's cigars." The stationmaster laughed, and we promised to obey all his injunctions. "Brown," I said, as we started away from the station, "I suppose you think you saw sights during the war, now, don't you? You call yourself one of the veterans."

"Don't," said Brown, preparing to light one of his everlasting cigarettes. "I'm tired in advance. I know exactly the line of argument you are about to pursue. Do you suppose that black spot off yonder is the north-bound train?"

We were walking along the side of the track, which ran in a straight line for miles. Far off was a dark point just visible, which we concluded must be an approaching train—nearer and larger, until we could see the fiery glow of its furnaces. It was Brown who exclaimed excitedly, "Isn't that a man walking on the track?" on discovering in the nearer perspective, a small black object that had either just appeared on the line or had been overlooked by us. A shuddering horror seized upon us both. My own thought was—what if that should be Frazer Holcombe, either bent on this dreadful ending of all his troubles, or else so wrapped in reverie as to be unconscious of his peril? We tore our way down the side of the track, waving our hats and handkerchiefs wildly. The train was creeping up behind him. Plainly it was a man, walking towards us with folded arms and head down-dropped. With frantic yells we finally attracted his attention. The engineer added his shrill note of warning. The man started as if from sleep, and flung up his hands despairingly. We closed our eyes to shut out the sickening sight. The locomotive dashed past us with hot, panting breath. The short train swept by us before we mustered courage to take one forward step. When we did, there was nothing in sight but a long trail of black smoke and the far-reaching ties that were trembling under our feet.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HIS ONE CHANCE

"DID you do it designedly?" I asked, kneeling down to whisper the question into Frazer Holcombe's ears.

"I am not that sort of coward. It was my only chance," he answered, before closing his white lips rigidly, as if he was afraid some outcry of pain might escape from them.

We had found him, Brown and I, bleeding and bruised, in a dry gully, over which a long stretch of trestlework extended.

"But what in the devil did you mean by walking along in front of the train unless you were trying to commit suicide?" Brown asked, glaring at him savagely while handling him as tenderly as a mother could handle a sick baby. "Didn't you hear the locomotive behind you?"

"Yes; as distinctly as I hear you now. I think I must have been a little absent-minded. I had been walking along the ties outside the rails until I got to the trestlework over the gully. I think I must have forgotten I had stepped over the rail."

Between us we got him up the steep bank by supporting him under the arms. The chief injury seemed to be to his right arm. It was broken in several places. He leaned more and more heavily upon us until we reached level ground.

"Lay him down," said Brown, in an imperious voice.

We laid him down. His eyes were closed and a pallor as of death spread over his face. He had swooned.

"Who is he, anyhow?" Brown asked, in an awe-struck whisper.

"His name is Walter Frazer, and he is a stationer's clerk. I'm afraid he's worse hurt than we thought. I happen to know where his mother lives."

"Looks like a gentleman, poor boy, in spite of his seedy coat," Brown muttered compassionately.

I left Brown with him, while I hurried away in the direction of Mrs. Frazer's house. The gate was standing wide open, and as I passed through it I could see the small black handmaiden who had ushered me in that morning careering wildly around the little vegetable garden that lay on one side of the house, intent on the ejectment of a calf that was feasting in a bed of late cabbages. There was no time to stand on ceremony. I hurried up the short walk to the front door and knocked vigorously. My summons was answered instantly. The door to the shabby parlor was opened, and there, standing on the threshold, with her hands clasped about the handle of a broom, was a muscular young woman with certain points of beauty which I did not stop to analyze at that moment. We stared at each other in mutual astonishment. I heard her gasp the word "Mercy!" under her breath, then, in obedience to the universal feminine instinct, she felt her back hair.

"I want to see Mrs. Frazer," I said.

She glanced behind her into the room and answered:

"You can't do it."

I pressed rudely past her into the room. Mrs. Frazer was seated in a high-backed wooden rocking-chair. Her head was resting against the back. Her arms hung listlessly over the arms of her chair. One hand still retained its hold of the creased and soiled ribbon strings of a shabby bonnet that lay on the floor and had been utilized by a luxurious kitten for a temporary lodging-place. The splendid brown eyes that were common to mother and son were closed in a dull stupor.

"Now I hope you are satisfied," said the maiden with the broom indignantly. "I told you she wasn't fit to be seen." She interposed her buxom person between me and the chair.

"But her son is injured—sprang into a gully to escape the train," I said perplexedly, "and I wanted to break it to her before I hunted up a conveyance to fetch him home in, and there is no time to lose."

"Wallie hurt! Oh, Lord, what won't happen next?" The girl's face was full of such genuine distress that I lost sight of her previous aggressiveness. She bent over the stupefied woman and shook her vigorously by the shoulders.

"Mrs. Frazer! Mrs. Frazer! Wallie's hurt, and we've got to fix a place for him. Oh, mercy, she's worse than no mother! Do go along on my pony up to our house, and tell pa to give you the carriage. There isn't any sort of thing on wheels here. My pony's out yonder, hitched to the back fence; I just *galloped* down to straighten things up some be-

fore he got home. I knew she'd be that way, when I heard she'd been up to Styner's. Styner ought to be prosecuted for letting her have it. Pa says he ought. Mrs. Frazer!" (with another vigorous shake) "do try to rouse yourself. Your son is hurt; maybe he's killed."

The opium-eater opened her dulled eyes drowsily, smiled vacuously as she mumbled: "No; he's mad. He's mad with me. Gone—off—down road." Her lids dropped. She was oblivious again.

"There isn't a bit of use trying to do anything with her," the girl said, stamping her foot passionately. "I'll have his room ready. If I'd been floored as often as that man has, I'd give up and commit suicide, that I would. Aren't you ever going to start?" She turned on me snappishly, her eyes flashing through the tears she did not want me to see.

"But my dear young lady, you've not told me yet where I am to go."

"Oh, mercy; go to pa, of course. Right straight up the lane. My name's Fanny Dangerfield. I thought you knew that much. The pony's hitched to the back fence. I never want poor Mr. Frazer to catch me here doing her work. 'Mandy keeps a look-out for me. Styner ought to be prosecuted—yes, he ought."

I could hear her renewing her efforts to arouse Mrs. Frazer as I hurried through the house to where her pony was hitched out of sight behind a clump of laurel in the back yard. It was my first essay with a side-saddle, but as the day was nearing its close, and the neighborhood was but sparsely settled, I clattered up

the lane towards the old Frazer place without encountering criticism.

I knew it easily enough by the slight description the stationmaster had given me that afternoon—"a low white house setting far back in a large yard full of forest trees." This large yard appeared to be devoted to various domestic purposes. A red-faced man in his shirt-sleeves was sitting astride the fence superintending in person the feeding of a lot of fat white pigs in a pen built around a grand old oak. The pigs showed their appreciation of his fatherly interest by sniffing affectionately at his shoe-strings. An active little darky was energetically turning the crank of an extremely noisy corn-sheller, which answered as a supper-gong for a myriad of chickens, geese, and guinea fowls that came flying, fluttering, running, waddling from every direction to squabble over the grain that was dispensed with a liberal hand by a portly dame seated near the corn-sheller. She was dressed in a brilliant calico dress made in the extreme of fashion. Two pretty little maidens were coddling a very sick or very young lamb under one of the many big trees that ornamented the yard. In the foreground of this domestic picture was a handsome girl, who had been zealously aiming a croquet-ball at a wicket before I came in sight, but when I clambered down from her sister's pony and threw the bridle over the rack outside the yard, she poised her mallet over her shoulder to scrutinize me at leisure. An old negro was coming along the road driving before him a slow-stepping drove of stately turkeys. We met just at the gate.

"Is this the Dangerfield place?" I asked, by way of making quite sure.

"No, sah, the Frazer place," was the significant answer, given with the old man's ragged cap held courteously aloft.

The white man in the shirt-sleeves met me halfway. I told my errand hurriedly. The little darky was dispatched at a full run to order the carriage. If I had not vetoed it, the entire family, barring the little lamb-nurses, would have volunteered their personal services and gone with me. Mr. Dangerfield was restlessly anxious that things should be done expeditiously, and went round to the stables to assist personally. Mrs. Dangerfield was morbidly eager to hear every detail, and to have my personal view as to the extent of the danger.

"I'm going to let Aunt Chloe know," said the girl with the mallet, flinging it from her as she mounted the front steps with a graceful bound and disappeared from view.

"Who is Aunt Chloe?" I asked, nervously, dreading the infliction of some acidulous maiden lady on that suffering man down the road.

"One of the old Frazer darkies. She just worships the name and everybody it belongs to, except the old lady. My, my, but that boy does seem to have the hardest luck. I wish——"

But the carriage came rolling round the corner of the house at that minute, and I sprang to a place by the driver. "I'll send a boy for Mills; don't bother about that," Mr. Dangerfield called after me, while Mrs. Dangerfield charged me with countless messages, among them was one to "Fanny" to be sure and come back in the carriage.

There was no one in sight but Mandy, the small

handmaiden, when Brown and I, supporting our man by the arms, appeared in the doorway.

"Dis way," she said in an awe-struck voice, turning nimbly to lead us to a little back bedroom which we found in perfect order. By the time we had made him as comfortable as was possible without the aid of surgery, the door opened softly and a little old woman, whose withered black face was seamed with anxious lines, came hurriedly in.

"What's the matter wid my chile?" she said, going straight up to the bedside, and crooning lovingly over that one poor bruised and battered remnant of her "w'ite folks."

Holcombe opened his eyes to smile feebly at her. I felt assured on the score of a nurse for our patient.

"I thought he had a mother," said Brown, close into my ears. I mumbled something about the shock, and nerves, and overcome. I was in dread of the momentary appearance of that dreadful woman, and sincerely hoped that Miss Dangerfield had locked her up.

"See here, Brown," I said briskly; "there's no use consuming your time, and mine too, this way. Suppose you go back to the station and order supper for two. I'll join you as soon as I've heard the doctor's report. He's all right, now that old lady's come. These Southern mammies beat our professional nurses all hollow."

Brown acted on my suggestion promptly and gladly.

As soon as the door closed on him Holcombe called to me feebly. I had not known he was taking such close note of us. "I am so much obliged to you; I'd rather have only you, but I didn't want your friend to

think me unappreciative. There's another thing I want to say. Don't let the doctor drug me. If he leaves any of his accursed morphine in the house, fling it into the fire. I don't want to take up any more of your time; but, you see, I can't write to Nannie now, and, maybe, if I was to die, she—Matilda, I mean—wouldn't object to taking the old house from me then. Perhaps I may want to alter that paper."

"But you are not going to die," I said briskly, "and you and Miss Matilda will want the old house together some day."

He closed his eyes and turned his face wearily to the wall. I walked off to the window in hope of seeing the doctor's buggy approaching. Aunt Chloe was fluttering around the poor little room, uttering half-audible ejaculations over its bareness. The door opened softly and Mandy came in noiselessly on her small unshod feet, carrying a lamp carefully in both hands.

"Miss Fanny shined the chimbly," she said, softly, with a gaze of admiration at the polished glass. "It was jes' as smoky befo'. Miss Fanny say she want t' see you fo' she go." This message Mandy delivered immediately into my face, in a sort of hissing whisper, with a nervous glance towards the bed. Evidently she had been warned against letting the invalid know anything about Miss Fanny's activity in his behalf.

"Where is she?" I asked just as softly.

"In de kitching. She waitin'."

I followed her immediately. The kitchen was a small wooden affair, scarcely more than a shed. The most enticing odors greeted my nostrils as I stooped to enter the low-browed door, chief among which was

the rich aroma of coffee. The room was fitfully illumined by a flaring torch of pinewood sticks in an iron framework. Miss Dangerfield was standing in front of the stove with her hat on, buttoning up her walking-jacket. I could see by the flickering light of the torch that her eyes were swollen from crying.

"I wanted to give you a decent cup of coffee before I left—I'm going now," she said in her direct way. "Mandy, fetch a cup and saucer."

Mandy disappeared in the darkness. I suppose she crossed the yard in search of the cup and saucer, for she was gone long enough for Miss Dangerfield to intrench herself very strongly in my esteem.

"You'll find plenty to eat there in the safe, in case you have to sit up all night. And Mandy's promised me to keep the coffee hot for you; but I know she'll be sound asleep in five minutes after I'm gone. Aunt Chloe's first-rate in a sick-room, but she's too old to be of much service now. You needn't expect much help from Mrs. Frazer to-night. I made her go to bed. I've burnt up all the stuff she had in her pocket. I reckon you think it's queer, my taking all this on myself, and that's what I specially wanted to see you about. I was afraid you might accidentally let out about me before him. He doesn't know about my ever helping his mother. He'd put a stop to it if he did. Somehow or other I can't help feeling like I'd helped to bring him down in the world, because his father would sell, and pa says he thought he might as well own the old place as have it go to strangers. I wish I felt that way about it; but I don't. He'd hate me if he knew I knew as much as I do about this

house and her. He thinks, I reckon, that she manages pretty well, considering."

"Aren't you afraid Amanda might betray you?" I said, smiling into the frank, girlish face that was growing handsomer in my eyes every second.

"Mandy! Wild horses couldn't drag a word out of Mandy that would hurt me; could it, Mandy?"

Mandy had just reappeared in her usual noiseless fashion with the cup swinging by its handle from one of her fingers. The saucer was clasped to her loyal young breast like a shield.

"Yes'm," Mandy answered with calm irrelevance; "dar, now, I thought I gwin forgit somepin—sugar!" She darted out of sight again fleetly.

I laughed, so did Miss Dangerfield.

"I wish I could know before I go to sleep just what the doctor does think," she said, anxiously.

"You shall," I said. "I'll come up to the house myself." I held out my hand to her. I wanted her to understand that I believed her to be a good, brave woman, actuated by higher motives than mere girlish sentimentality.

"Thank you," she said. Then she proceeded to pour me a cup of coffee that a *chef* need not have blushed for. "Fetch the biscuit, Mandy," she said quietly, pouring some rich cream into my cup. "You didn't prepare these things yourself?" I said, taking one of the warm, feathery things from the plate Mandy handed proudly.

"Who else?" Then with humble self-depreciation: "That is about all I can do, you know—cook. It would be a pity if I couldn't do that much decently.

Young ladies up your way know everything, don't they?"

Before I had any opportunity to combat this humble estimate of her own acquirements, Mandy's quick ears had detected the sound of wheels, and I started back towards the house to hear the doctor's verdict.

"One moment," said Miss Dangerfield, hastily plunging into the pocket of her dress and bringing out an envelope. "Pa sent this down a little while ago by one of the hands. He sent word I must give it to you. I think he's made a mistake. I don't think we can help him that way. But, whatever you do, don't hand it over to her; it would do more harm than good. You needn't trouble to come up to the house. Dr. Mills has to pass, and I'll make Jess waylay him."

This young woman evidently had a talent for managing. I had sufficient curiosity to examine the envelope which she had placed in my hands before I reëntered the sick-room. In ignorance of my name her father had begun abruptly:

"MY DEAR SIR: You will please make use of the little inclosure for Mr. Frazer's benefit. I haven't any money to throw away, but his father and me were old-times friends, and I shouldn't want his son to suffer for the needful. Call for more if necessary."

This surpassing kindness would have been set down by me to the overflowing goodness of heart of the average Virginian if I had never known anything concerning Mr. Dangerfield's previous connection with the Frazer family, but this voluntary munificence, coming, as it did, so soon after the stationmaster had

sowed the seed of suspicion in my mind, only had the effect of watering that seed and causing it to spout vigorously. What the average Virginian *can* be in a time of sickness and suffering it was my good fortune to witness.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. CULPEPPER'S LASSES.

IF I were asked to name, on the spur of the moment, the most conspicuous social characteristic of the Virginian, I should say "warmheartedness." If I were asked to give the result of my most mature consideration of the same subject, I should still say "warmheartedness." If it had not been for Frazer Holcombe's unconsidered plunge from that trestlework, I should never have set myself up for an authority on this subject. As it is, I do.

It was half-past nine o'clock before I sat down with Brown to the supper he had ordered at what was called "The Frazer House," a miserable little two-story frame concern that perpetuated the name of the fallen dynasty fittingly. I had come up to tell him that I proposed to remain a little while on Frazer's account.

"Hasn't the fellow any neighbors or friends to look after him?" Brown asked, evidently at a loss to understand my profound interest in this case, and irritated at this change of programme. I thought it best to tell him that I was trying to make terms with the stationer's clerk for some property he was slightly interested in, in Mississippi, and that I should save time by remaining on the spot until he was able to discuss business. "Suppose you finish that story about your trip down the river," I said. "You know I'll be going

back to Crooked Creek soon, and by this change of programme, you'll have time to scamper down to Florida, look at that orange grove, which I know will *not* suit you, and be back here in time to go on with me, in case——"

"In case of what?" he asked.

"In case you don't find yourself ashamed to look Miss Mary Maxwell in the face when all's told."

Brown laughed sceptically, and I took a malicious secret delight in contemplating the difficulties he would encounter in patching things up with that spirited young woman on the Creek, in the event of his desiring to.

"Where was I," he asked, meditatively playing with the crumbs about his plate, "when you were called out?"

"You had just started down the river again, after pretending to burn that old woman's cotton, and I haven't made out yet what that had to do with Miss Mary."

"Everything in the world, my dear boy—everything, I assure you. If it had not been for that episode and that old woman, I never should have heard a word about Miss Maxwell's heartless thirst for conquest; and might have fallen an easy victim thereto myself. As it was——"

"Well, as it was," I said, tartly, reserving comment for the finale.

"As it was, I went on down that river consumed with the desire to hear something more about the pretty little rebel who had bewitched me out of all prudence. If it hadn't been that I was on my way down to New Orleans for troops, I think I would have left the

transport in command of my lieutenant, when we got near Banks's Landing, and made a fool of myself. I did not, however, go quite that far. I carried along with me a letter—I had written it before I left Vicksburg. It was a regular proposal of marriage. I did not ask her to engage herself to me, but I told her in it that I was serious, and that I should come for her answer as soon as hostilities ceased. I was trusting to chance, you see, to convey it to her. I executed a manœuvre when I was taking my boat back up the river crowded with troops. I got more credit from the boys than I deserved for it, too. It was when we were nearing my old friend's little place again. I had told the story of that sick girl, Milly, and her forlorn old mother to a knot of sympathizing fellows, and declared my intention of rowing ashore with some comforts for them of a substantial sort. No one was to go with me. It was my own affair, and if harm came to me it should come to me alone. The boys wanted to make up a purse then and there for the owner of the cotton I'd set fire to. (You are the first one, Halsey, that's ever heard I did not burn it, really). But I told them that wouldn't do; she'd never take it. I rowed ashore in the smallest boat I had. When I got opposite the little shanty, carrying with me a lot of crackers and canned fruits and things, I found the old lady sitting on her back steps stringing popcorn together. The sick girl was sitting by her side trying to make herself a pair of shoes. I tell you, Halsey, the women down there were put to it for everything those days. The old lady jumped up in a sort of fright when she saw me. I think she thought I'd come to arrest her for *putting* out that fire.

"I put my cans and boxes down on the gallery floor and raised my cap to the white-faced girl sitting there. Tears came into their eyes when they understood the true state of affairs, and their gratitude made me feel like the cheat I was. I beckoned the old woman out of sight of the younger one, and asked her straight out if she had any means of communicating with the Crooked Creek neighborhood.

"She blazed out at me and told me if I had come there to bribe her by a few mouthfuls of food into telling me anything about the battery her own dear sons belonged to, I was making a mistake. She and Milly were living on sweet potatoes alone, but they'd come down to worse yet before I'd get anything out of her. I told her in short order what I wanted of her—simply to get a letter through the lines to a young lady—and I put the letter in her hand. I thought she looked at the name curiously, and cold shivers ran over me at the thought that Miss Maxwell might be dead. When I asked the old woman if anything had happened, her answer made me still more determined to find out what she did mean. It wasn't hard to win it from her—a disgraceful story, brought to her by her own sons who were bemoaning the loss of their Captain, driven from his post of duty and stolen from his fiancée by the artful wiles of the trader's daughter. I took the letter back from the old hag, tore it into a thousand pieces, and, getting into my skiff, rowed back to the transport, cut—but—well, it didn't take long to heal, that's all."

"And of course, you never once thought of doubting that rubbishy story? Of course, you took it for granted that the trader's daughter could be none too

good to play the rôle assigned her by local prejudice. I tell you, Brown, all the harm I wish you is that you may somehow or other come in contact with that girl, and lose that worthless heart of yours over again, this time irrecoverably. Then I want her to take the fullness of revenge."

"I say, hold on!" Brown said, growing crimson up to the very roots of his curly hair.

He put his hand out to detain me, as I pushed my chair back over the bare floor with an abominable scraping.

"Can't," I said, relentlessly; "I promised Frazer I'd be back in an hour and a half. Time's up now. Ta-ta; hope you will find a place in Florida to suit you." I walked back to the Frazers', morally sure that Brown would be on hand when I was ready to start for Crooked Creek.

I was eating the late breakfast which Aunt Chloe and Mandy between them (I supposed) had conjured up for me out of a poorly stocked larder, when Mrs. Frazer tumbled (no other word will express my meaning) into the little dining-room with her arms high piled with a heterogeneous collection of things to be gotten out of sight.

"Mercy! I didn't know you were here." She laughed at me hysterically over her bonnet, which formed the apex to the pyramidal heap in her arms. "Mandy and old Chloe are such fools. They told me a gentleman sat up with poor Wallie, but never once said he was here yet. I'm sure it was very good of you. I had one of my terrible nervous headaches last night. They just render me useless while they last. The house'll just swarm with people all day long."

This rapidly while she was depositing the bonnet and lamp, and old newspapers, and a ragged sofa-cushion, and a plate with a slice of cold pie on it, and sundry other things on a rickety side-table. "I do hope they have given you something you can eat for breakfast. Old Chloe used to be a brag cook. She's just devoted to Wallie. There, Mandy, you go right straight and put on your new head-handkerchief and a clean apron. Keep yourself fit to attend the door, too."

"It's such a comfort," turning graciously towards me, "to have a gentleman in the house at such a time. Wallie tells me it's one of his ribs and his right arm. Dear me?" it all comes of getting in such a temper about my letter to you. The Frazers have the worst tempers I ever did hear of. Maybe he'll listen to reason, now that he can't do a lick of work. It really does look like a dispensation of Providence to bring him to reason."

She had tarried long enough after unloading to take a cup of coffee, standing. She was dressed in a trailing pink wrapper of some flimsy woolen stuff, adown the front of which fell a cascade of cheap lace. Her hair was elaborately dressed, and on her wrists were the inevitable showy manacles. She was evidently gotten up for the occasion.

"I dressed before breakfast," she said, complacently, as she poured herself out a second cup of the strong black fluid, "because I knew I wouldn't have time to breathe afterwards. Mrs. Mills is certain to drive over with the doctor. She was first cousin to Wallie's grandmother, old enough to stay at home, but she don't. She thinks the world of Wallie. Here, Mandy, take a bucket in the parlor and take those ashes out of

the fireplace. Be quick about it, too." Mrs. Frazer evidently looked upon Wallie's accident in the light of a social event. Her former mode of existence, I presume, had made excitement an absolute necessity to her. Lacking it in any other form had, perhaps, been at the bottom of her seeking it in the use of opium. But to-day promised to give her full measure of the unusual, and she was electrified by the prospect. I had gone back into Frazer's room, and was feeding his famished soul by a minute description of how things looked in and about Montrose, when the door opened abruptly and Mrs. Frazer swept into view.

"Son, here's Lulu and Rob. They've just heard about your being hurt, and nothing would do but they must come over themselves. Lulu's brought you the loveliest chrysanthemums, and Rob brought two fat squabs all picked and ready for the broiler. Mrs. Tucker's coming over later herself. She sent word."

Lulu was a shy-eyed little maid, just tall enough to tiptoe and press a soft kiss on Frazer's white forehead as she laid the flowers on the bed by him. "We're mighty sorry, Rob and me; and mamma said we were to tell you she had a sheep killed and 's going to make your mutton-broth herself."

Frazer put out his uninjured arm and drew both little folks close to him. "These are my pets, Halsey," he said, smiling into their awe-struck faces, "my sunbeams—the sort of sunbeams that sometimes fall on the unjust."

"Mrs. Tucker was a Frazer," said Mrs. Frazer, evidently not loath to appropriate the two small aristocrats, who glanced about the shabby little room somewhat superciliously—"first cousin to Wallie's

father. The Tuckers are mighty fortunate. They've come out of the war fuller-handed than some of the rest of us. Well?" This to Mandy, who just then loomed in the doorway, looking preternaturally important and several inches taller since she had donned her brand-new Madras.

"Miss Bemus done sont a leg er lamb, en say she mighty sorry to hear 'bout the trouble, an' she gwine ride over herself arter dinner wid some jelly. En she say how is Mars Wallie? En I don' know whar t' hang the lam'!" Mrs. Frazer disappeared to send a message, presumably, to Mrs. Bemus, and to dispose of her offering. It was during her absence that Mandy returned suddenly, ushering in an elderly gentleman, whose urbane manners and soft hands induced me to catalogue him at once among the "old-timers."

"Yhere's yo' Unc' John come t' see you," Mandy announced in capacity of mistress of ceremonies, before retreating once more.

"Just heard of it, my dear fellow—too bad, too bad?"

Frazer introduced me as his "friend" to his uncle, Mr. Culpepper. Mr. Culpepper held my hand almost affectionately, while he asked: "Stopping in our neighborhood for any length of time, sir?" I explained that I was there exclusively on a matter of business with Mr. Walter Frazer, and would probably leave the following day or the one after.

"So? Then come up and take dinner and stop all night with me. Two nights, three nights—as many as you please. Tell him he's in the way here, Wallie, and you'd like to get rid of him. The girls are putting you up a lot of stuff, by the way. I left Mag

making some wafers. That's a penalty everybody in the neighborhood has to pay for getting sick," he explained to me with a jolly laugh. "Mag swoops down on them with a peck or so of her wafers."

"Halsey will begin to think that a broken bone involes a tremendous consumption of food in this locality," Holcombe said. "I wish you would go home with Uncle John, Halsey. You can't be comfortable in that hole at the station."

"Station! Mr. Culpepper's aristocratic features were distorted with disgust. "No, but, by George! you're not putting up at that kennel. It won't do, sir. We haven't much to offer you, but at least we can give you a clean bed. I'm on my way there for my letters; will bring back your baggage and pick you up on my way back. I'm sure Walter's had more than enough of you by this time." He beamed on us both impartially while drawing on his big yellow gauntlets.

I opened my mouth to protest, when Mandy once more claimed attention. She was standing in the doorway with her clawlike hands clasped rigidly about a big cut-glass bowl over which was tied a handsome damask napkin.

"Miss Dang'fiel' sent you some cusserd en say how you commin' on?"

"Mrs. Dangerfield be hanged!" said the urbane Mr. Culpepper in a vehement undertone. "She can well afford to be sending cut-glass bowls of custard around the country. Infernal impudence sending it here, though."

I noticed that the sick man looked flushed and

worried. All this neighborly zeal seemed to be trying to him.

"You would rather we should all clear out, is that it?" I asked.

"Not at all, not at all. I was thinking of what Uncle John just said. He has some queer ideas about Dangerfield, and thinks I am a cowardly spaniel for not turning things upside down. I wouldn't like to undertake it unless I could carry it to a successful close. I've been on the losing side long enough. I think, Halsey, as a lawyer, Uncle John can convince you that I'm right."

"Are you a lawyer, sir? and Wallie's friend? Then, by George! the obligation will be entirely on my part if you'll go home with me. I've nothing to offer you. I'm broke—smashed all to flinders." (This with the jolliest imaginable laugh.) "If it wasn't for my girls I'd have been in the poorhouse by this time; fact, sir. It's worth a ride through five miles of mud to see my lasses; isn't it Wallie? Now, then, for your bag and my letters. Keep a stiff upper lip, Wallie. Good-by."

He was gone, after giving Holcombe's well arm a vigorous pumping. The room seemed to have been freshly aired by his breezy presence and cheery personality.

"Is that one of your war victims?" I asked of Frazer, as the creaking of the old gentleman's shoes died away in the distance.

"He's one of our war heroes," said Holcombe, with kindling eyes. "Go to his home with him and you will see a man who was old when the wreck overcome him, and who is compelled to live humbly in a home

that was once a place of Sybaritish ease. You will find his old slaves clinging to him in his fallen fortunes, confident that he will deal fairly by them in their business relations. You will find his three lasses, of whom he is justly very proud—girls who were finishing at a fashionable boarding-school when the war broke out—'holding up' the old man's hands loyally and lovingly. Each one of them has her 'hobby,' Uncle John calls it. And when the South fills up with such hobbyists we will begin to pull out of the mire. I think his 'lasses' are at the bottom of the old man's exuberant spirits."

"What are the hobbies of these fair cousins? I begin to think this is the place where the whole world is kin."

"They are not really cousins, you know. But when I settled here after the war, that dear old man claimed me on the score of some remote tie, and I was glad enough to admit the claim. The girls' hobbies? One is the cultivation of small fruits for the Northern market. Another is silk-culture. The other makes and markets the best butter in the country."

"Pity they should have to lay aside their accomplishments for such sordid pursuits," I said, stupidly, at which Holcombe smiled and said: "Wait until you have seen them."

"Is he gone?"

Mrs. Frazer followed this inquiry into the room.

"I always make myself scarce when old Mr. Culpepper's about," she said, with that ringing laugh of hers, under which Frazer winced perceptibly. "He is not one of my admirers. I reckon it's because I don't work quite as hard as his girls do. They're real

smart; I'm not going to deny that; but if I was a young man looking for a wife I'd never look at a Culpepper if Fanny Dangerfield was in sight. She's worth any two of them. There goes that door again."

I was glad that this invasion was made by the doctor and his venerable wife. From my heart I pitied the man upon whom fate had inflicted the burden of a mother whom he could not respect. I began to appreciate more fully the absolute barrier she formed between him and Miss Ransom.

CHAPTER XX.

VIRGINIA NEIGHBORS.

IT was not with a description of the glories that had faded out of his own life, nor by drawing dismal contrasts between his present and his past, nor yet, again, by a statistical showing of the number of slaves he owned and the quantity of tobacco he cured "before the war," that my fine old Virginia gentleman entertained me, as his rather-the-worse-for-wear team of mules dragged us and his decidedly the-worse-for-wear buggy over the stiff mud that lay between his house and Frazer's. Beyond an occasional somewhat chirrupy assertion that, "He was broke! Smashed all to flinders, sir," I never heard Mr. Culpepper refer to himself individually. Apart from his somewhat frequent outbursts of parental pride in his "lasses," he confined himself almost exclusively during that deliberate drive to a discussion of Walter Frazer's affairs.

"Hang it, sir," he said, with that explosive energy of utterance which would lead you to expect great things of Mr. Culpepper, "that boy was a tremendous surprise to this neighborhood. A tre-men-dous one. When I was a beau, that boy's father was considered one of the 'catches' of this county. Not as good-looking as Wallie, though, not by half—by ha-a-lf. But this boy's handicapped. Tre-men-dously, sir. If he'd come back here by himself—yes, sir, entirely by *himself*—the whole neighborhood would have opened

its arms to him. Yes, sir, its arms. But it's manifestly impossible for anybody—yes, sir, impossible, I say, for anybody—to open his arms to that remarkable mother of his. I couldn't invite her to an intimacy with my lasses. No, sir, by George! they wouldn't stand her, if I did. My lasses are regular touch-me-nots when it comes to anything like coarseness. Mills couldn't ask his wife to call on her. Mrs. Mills is the most uncompromising old aristocrat in this country. You see, we've just been powerless. That's the reason, I reckon, everybody is so anxious to assure him on this particular occasion of their individual regard for him as a Frazer. But as for her!—Bah! She won't go down—no, sir, we can't absorb Mrs. Frazer."

"Then you had never heard of the senior Frazer's marriage?"

"No, sir, not a breath—not a breath!" He leaned over to secure the blue cotton spread which was doing duty for laprobe more securely about my knees. "Mud a foot deep in my lane," he said cheerfully—"no, sir, not a breath. Small wonder he kept it from his friends. As long as Miss Sallie Frazer remained unmarried—splendid woman she was, too—splen-did—things went well enough with Walter—this boy's father, I mean. There was just two of them, Miss Sallie and Walter. They lived over there at the old Frazer place, and Miss Sallie kept things straight, from Walter down to the littlest nigger on the place. But when she married Holcombe, and moved off to Mississippi, things took a turn. Yes, sir—a turn for the worse—de-ci-ded-ly for the worse.

"Dangerfield wasn't married then. He was Frazer's overseer—a shrewd, sharp fellow, just a few years

older than the master of the place. Frazer was always a trifle weak—morally, I mean. I don't know that that's the way to put it, either. He lacked backbone —soul of honor—wouldn't go back on friend or foe after his word was given—but pliable and easygoing. Too much money and nothing to do—that's what ruined him, sir—yes, ruined him. It's a pity Miss Sallie married and moved away so soon after he got back from college. You see he and Dangerfield had the house to themselves after Miss Sallie married. It wasn't long before it began to be rumored about the neighborhood that Frazer spent all his evenings playing cards with Dangerfield. There's the trouble in neighborhoods like this—nothing for the young men to interest themselves in of evenings. It's not so dangerous now as it was before the war, when the boys had some money to go to the devil with. Too poor now to buy a through ticket, you see.

"Well, if you ever played cards, you know what an infernal appetite for gambling you can acquire in no time. Soon it got beyond a rumor. It was a barefaced fact that Walter Frazer was giving himself over to poker and to the devil, or the devil's agent, William T. Dangerfield. One or two of us tried to just put the brakes on, but we were invited to mind our own business. It didn't take Dangerfield long to wind him up. I think Miss Sallie hadn't been out of the way more than two years before it got out that Dangerfield held a mortgage on everything that Frazer owned, and that Frazer had gone to New Orleans to get into business, if he could, so as to lift the mortgage from the old place.

"The sort of business he got into, I conclude, was

to marry that woman who hangs like a millstone around her son's neck. When this boy came here after the war—came to look into his father's affairs—he came to me for advice. He's a splendid chap, honorable, upright—a trifle Quixotic on the score of filial duty, however. I asked him if he had any clear understanding as to how the old place had passed into Dangerfield's name, and he tells me that from letters of his father's which his mother had in her possession, he discovers that it was in payment of gambling debts.

"Wallie is curiously reticent about his past—doesn't speak of his father much. Never goes further back in his own life than war times. Now, I happen to know that Walter, senior, couldn't make a legal transfer of that farm. The family goes back to old colonial times. That farm originally belonged to a bachelor uncle of this boy's grandfather, and I've heard my own father speak of old Dicky Frazer's sagacity in fixing it so that the wild streak—it's in them all—couldn't make away with the old place entirely. I don't know anything about the documents. You see this infernal mess we've all just pulled through turned everything topsy-turvy. I've done al. I could to get Wallie to stir the matter up from the very bottom—yes, sir, from the very bottom."

"And he refuses to do it?"

"Won't do it, sir. Positively refuses to stir hand or foot in the matter. Says it was a debt of honor incurred by his father, and it must stand. Says he has no papers to show that his father only held a life interest in the farm, and has no money to pay lawyers to fight the matter out for him. Says if he could he wouldn't hold his father's memory up for scorn as a

man who had gambled away his child's inheritance. I tell you, sir, he's a regular Don Quixote, which is the same as calling him an idiot—yes, sir, idiot. He acts as if he had been stunned—actually stunned. He's got to that pass where he would rather hug his misery and hide his shame (that's his mother) than bring himself and his affairs prominently before the public gaze. I haven't spoken to him lately about it, for he's incorrigible, and we generally wind up in a row. The last time the subject came up he mumbled something about the fellow's big family of girls. What the deuce has that got to do with it, sir? That's what I want to know. Let them go to work. Daintier lasses than Dangerfield's daughters have had to put their hands to the plough. And that's why I wanted to talk this matter over with you. You're a lawyer, and you're Wallie's friend. I wish you would use your influence in getting him to stir this matter up. Here we are, and there they are," he added with an illumined face. The mules had stopped of their own accord in front of a large unpainted gate, but moved on again of their own accord as five emulous little darkies, evolved from space apparently, sprang simultaneously upon the lowest bar of the gate, and, clutching the clumsy wooden latch with ten small hands, sent the gate slowly swinging backwards on its creaking hinges, to give them a ride and us ingress. I caught a fleeting vision of a bright girl face framed in the front doorway before the mules turned soberly aside to approach the house in due form by way of a circular carriage-drive, that had once been gravelled, but now only faintly heralded our approach over the grass-covered pebbles. Mr. Culpepper chuckled as

he climbed laboriously out of the buggy and turned to assist me. His chuckle was as jolly as the heartiest laugh of some people.

"Gone," he said—"fluttered out of sight like a flock of partridges. Caught sight of a young face by the old man's. Sit down, sit down." He pointed to a big splint-bottomed chair on the gallery. "I'll go find the girls."

I made good use of my eyes during his short absence. The house, like all those Southern homes, had a superfluity of yard. At that particular juncture a small army of little darkies were waging relentless war on the weeds in the front section of it. They all stopped to stare at me placidly as soon as Mr. Culpepper disappeared indoors. They held various receptacles for the uprooted weeds in their left hands, hats and tin cans predominating. "I gwine tell Miss Dosh you ain' done a lick er work sence she went in de house. En she say you got t' git all de bitterweed out er this yard fo' she giv you one drap er 'lasses. Standin' there starin' at dat w'ite man!"

This had the desired effect. Curiosity as to my personality fell below par at the prospect of losing their precious reward of molasses.

"I've had three scoldings already—yes, sir, three," came from the doorway in my host's chirrupy voice—"one from Dosh here, who thinks it's an awful calamity a stranger should see the place on weeding-day for the first time. We call Dosh our retrospective member. She's always trying to keep things up to antebellum standards. But she can't do it, sir. We're broke—smashed all to flinders. Dosh, this is Mr.

Halsey—from Boston, I believe. Here, Dandy, come take this gentleman's bag."

Dandy sprang from among the weed-eradicators with monkeyish agility. Miss Culpepper offered me her hand frankly and made me feel thoroughly welcome in half-a-dozen words. "Dosh is our Doll the dairymaid," Mr. Culpepper explained, "and she's the one that wages war on the bitterweed in the yard. You know we leave the cows in after milking-time at night. Saves hunting them up in the morning." I made some conventional remarks about the view through the fine trees in front of the house.

"Our finest view is from the back door. Come this way." I thought Miss Culpepper uttered a faint exclamation of dismay. "Hadn't you better let Mr. Halsey rest until after dinner, papa?" she said, persuasively but vainly.

"Tired?" My host fired the word at me explosively. I could not truthfully say that I was. "Come on, then," he said cordially, leading the way through a lofty hall, which was lined with glass bookcases and hung with the trophies of many years' hunts. Its chief ornament, however, was the mahogany-railed spiral stairway that sprang upwards from its centre.

"Hillo!—bagged another one of them! Nan, here's Mr. Halsey from Boston, I believe. My second daughter, Mr. Halsey. A wise virgin who never forgets to put oil in her lamps."

It was too late to retreat, even if I had been so minded, which I certainly was not. A soft feminine echo of my host's rollicking laugh greeted my ears. A pair of roguish eyes met mine fearlessly, so I stepped out on the back gallery. This young lady

was standing before a shelf on which were a lot of dismembered kerosene lamps.

"It is impossible to do anything privately in this house if papa is about. He absolutely permeates the atmosphere. I am very glad to see you, Mr. Halsey, although I could have postponed that pleasure until these lamps were filled."

"Won't leave that nasty job to a darky," my host said explanatorily—"says they smash too many chimneys. And chimneys cost money. Nan's great on domestic economy."

"Papa will catalogue our merits, real and imaginary, very fully, Mr. Halsey, if you don't snub him. He's the most ridiculous old papa in the world. Dosh, can't you rescue our guest and carry him off to the garden? There is something worth bragging over there. Our fall roses are just superb."

"Where's Mag?" Mr. Culpepper asked, restlessly bent on displaying all his jewels at once.

"She's nowhere," said the "wise virgin" with a defiant little laugh, while she nodded her head vigorously at her sister, who was leisurely tying the ribbons of a garden hat under her plump chin. Mr. Culpepper was incorrigible.

"Good. I always like to hear of Mag's being nowhere. Nowhere is the vernacular for kitchen, Halsey! It augurs well for your dinner that my eldest daughter is invisible for the present. Don't let Dosh keep you pottering among the roses until midnight," he called after us as we descended the back steps. "She's one of those botanical monomaniacs that thinks you can't enjoy the smell of a rose until you

know its pedigree back to the first generation. Dosh is a nuisance in the garden."

I did not find her so. It's astonishing the amount of patience a man can bring to bear on the foibles of a handsome young woman of twenty or thereabouts, and I was rapidly adding to my limited stock of rose lore when Dandy brought us a verbal summons to dinner.

"This is my lass that you haven't seen." Mr. Culpepper confronted me proudly, with his arm around the waist of his first-born, whose soft cheeks, which were already flushed from contact with the kitchen stove, grew rosier still under her father's bare-faced laudation.

"You see," he resumed, only waiting long enough for Miss Culpepper to indicate my place at table, "you have all fallen into the error of thinking me an old dotard who must prate over his nestlings or expire. Not at all. I am more liberally bent than you think for. I am trying to improve Mr. Halsey's mind on the subject of that slightly misunderstood and universally misrepresented animal, the Southern woman. Spell it, sir!" (This to Dandy.)

With the most abrupt transition from suavity to fierceness, my host laid down the carving-knife and fork with which he had been skillfully dissecting the roast chicken in front of him to glare at Dandy, who was holding the bread-plate immediately under his nose.

Dandy's eyes rolled fearfully in his head. He relinquished his hold on the plate with one hand to give a furtive and much-needed jerk to the waistband of his trousers.

"Papa!" It was a chorus of reproach by three voices.

"B"—Dandy's eyes rolled toward Miss Culpepper, who sat in stately dignity at the head of the table—"r"—a glance of piteous appeal fell upon the wise virgin—"e"——

"Papa! you sha'n't disgrace us all. That's meant for me, Mr. Halsey. He can never make enough fun of my school. Dandy is one of my pupils."

"Ridicule! I ridicule my own exalted child's noble efforts to elevate and educate the future citizen of this enlightened land? I simply aim to supplement your efforts by a few well-timed object lessons, my love. When you go back to Boston, Halsey, if you find any man ignorant enough to affirm that all the progressive petticoats are up North, I want to put you in position to contradict them authoritatively, that's all. Dandy, pass Mr. Halsey the a-r-t-i-c-h-o-k-e-s."

Dandy made a dart for the rice and presented it to me with a glitter of intellectual triumph in his rolling eyes. This was too much for decorum. I think that was quite the merriest meal I ever partook of, and before Mr. Culpepper carried me off to smoke the pipes that must be smoked, I had in imagination filled several sheets of paper to my sisters anent this unique household, and added a supplement of Virginia receipts for mother's especial benefit.

The afternoon was spent in languorous intercourse with my genial host, whose age finally asserted itself, and he dozed off gently in his armchair.

"I thought that would be your fate," I heard a soft voice say immediately behind me. "Suppose you come out and take a mallet."

It was Doll the dairymaid. I was on my feet in a trice and passed out through the French window to where Miss Dosia Culpepper was waiting for me. The other two were already out on the lawn, where Dandy was briskly placing the wickets on the croquet-ground.

I don't know whether it was the enervating feather-bed that I had to climb up into, or the marvelous flannel-cakes that Miss Margaret gave us for supper, that night, which banished sleep from my eyelids so completely that I finally got up and stepped out on the gallery in front of my room. It was on the garden side of the house, and the commingled fragrance of roses and chrysanthemums was afloat on the mild air. I thought I heard a slight commotion in the direction of the garden. I remembered with a pang of alarm that Miss Culpepper had left me to latch the gate behind her. I also remembered what Mr. Culpepper had said about the right uses of the big front yard. It was a dark night, but by the starlight I could see the milch cows reclining under the big trees or lazily nipping the short, dry grass in the yard. There was a decided scuffle going on there in the garden. I seized my hat and was about to precipitate myself into the arena of action, when I heard the iron latch to the gate fall with a click, and a cow, lowing resentfully, trotted briskly past my window.

Out there in the dark I heard a ripple of girl laughter, and two scurrying figures in dark wrappers rushed by my post of observation. I could hear a conscientious scraping of feet on the corn-shuck mat in front of the door. Then I heard the wise virgin say:

"Don't mention it, Dosh. He might feel badly to

think he'd forgotten to latch the gate. I don't think she got your Maréchal Neils."

"Of course," "Dosh" answered irrelevantly.

They were gone, and I climbed back into my soft nest and lay there awake a long time, pondering over the sweetness, the strength, and the gentle courtesy of these three brave Virginia lasses.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RETURN TO MONTROSE.

MY nature lent itself very kindly to the luxury of lying abed of mornings until a flaming torch should pierce the darkness and a face blacker than the night should follow the torch into my room, and a great shovelling up of dead ashes, and laying on of huge logs and splintering of inflammable kindling should be succeeded by a flashing and crackling and glowing that permeated every cranny of the room and stirred my sluggish pulses with a fresh sense of obligation to be up and doing. There was a positive inspiration in those early-hour illuminations, notwithstanding which I was generally quite content to remain prone until good-naturedly ordered to "git up," when my beneficent fire-fiend was ready to betake himself and his firebrand to some other chilled corner of the big house at Montrose.

Not infrequent dialogues took place between the pampered occupant of the big four-post bedstead, planted immovably against the wall, and the patient fire-builder on the hearth. Those dialogues may have fallen a trifle below the classic standard of the peripatetic philosophers, but were none the less edifying to both parties. Only sickness or extreme stress of weather ever induced Scipio to delegate the making of my fire to other hands than his own. He seemed to extract a mysterious sort of satisfaction from tramp-

ing through the chill darkness, over the mud that intervened between his cabin and the big house, to give me what he called a "rarin' starter."

There was an unfamiliar sound about the activities on my hearth, the first morning after my return to Montrose, which induced me to sit up and reconnoitre. The length of limb and breadth of shoulder that intervened between me and the struggling flames did not belong to Scipio.

"Who is that?" I asked sleepily.

"'Bijah," came laconically between two vigorous puffs at the fire.

"Where is Scipio?" I especially wanted to see the old man that morning, to confer with him about Frazer Holcombe, having got in too late the night before to do anything but hunt up a spare room for Brown, who was with me, before tumbling into bed.

"Ol' man Scip' done lock up," said 'Bijah stolidly, as he gathered the scattered sticks of kindling into one brawny hand and stood up with his flaming torch held so that I could see every line of his dark face distinctly. It was not a pleasant study.

"Locked up what?" I asked stupidly enough.

"Hissef done lock up. Ol' man Scip' been in jail out at Vernon three weeks—gwine on fo'."

"But what for?" with testy impatience.

"Gin-burnin'. Mr. Cooper say dey gwine sen' him up for five years. Dey pammel de jury yistiday."

"I'll be hanged if they shall," I said, bouncing out of bed with entirely uncalled-for precipitation, seeing that Vernon, the county seat, was full twelve miles away, and there was no possibility of my breakfasting yet for at least two hours. I was glad I had got back

in time to take part in this farcical trial. Nothing would be easier than to prove Scipio's innocence of the charge brought against him. I thought 'Bijah viewed my energetic desertion of my soft nest with covert disapproval.

"W'at you gwine do, boss, in sech a big hurry?"

"I am going to get Scipio out of jail."

"Ev'dence is moughty strong ag'in de ol' man," Bijah said surlily, following me with sullen glances as I began my toilet in angry haste; "de jury is 'bout made up der min's already, I reckon, on dat p'int. You see, it war'n' in reason that ol' man Scip should jes' ben wanderin' 'roun' for fun that night."

"I can prove an alibi," I said, buckling my suspenders with a series of savage jerks which punished no one but myself.

"You kin prove which, boss?" By the flaring light of the torch, held immediately in front of his face, I could see an ashen hue spread itself slowly over 'Bijah's ebony face, like a gray veil. His heavy lower jaw dropped, and the light sticks of kindling wood in his right hand trembled perceptibly.

"An alibi." I repeated the mysterious word with a slow, impressiveness which gave me time to confirm the suspicions he had aroused against himself. The word, or something else, had a stunning effect on him. He turned away without another sound, and I could hear him dragging his heavy feet along the uncarpeted hall, as if he had rather added to than lightened the heavy load he had to carry, since leaving my presence.

This was not at all how I had planned to spend the first day of my return to Montrose. But every other consideration gave way before Scipio's need of help. I

was quite prepared to learn that Cooper had been true to his threat. The friendly relations existing between the old man and me had always acted as an irritant, and it had resulted in this fashion. However, I believed myself lawyer enough to exculpate my old friend with no greater inconvenience than the upsetting of all my plans for that day.

There was Brown just across the hall from me, doubtless sleeping placidly; Brown had enviable talents in that direction. He had come back from Florida in excellent time to start with me for Crooked Creek—in such very excellent time, indeed, as to give life to the suspicion that he had not done full justice to the orange groves of Florida in the way of inspection. I had planned to take Brown over to the Maxwells' that morning and drop him in the midst of them without other explanations than that he was a home-seeker, and he and Miss Mary could fight it out or patch it up according to their own inclinations. I was morally convinced Brown himself was for patching it up. I had purposed leaving him in Mr. Bud Maxwell's hands, and discreetly drawing out of the game myself.

I really had quite as much as I could cope with already—more, in point of fact, unless I was willing to wind up syndicate matters and leave the tangled snarl of Frazer Holcombe's private affairs severely alone.

I had stayed in Virginia long enough to make sure of several things. Frazer Holcombe was not going to die. He was simply going to be helpless and useless until his bones knit together again, and he was going to bear all that came with that dogged patience he had assumed. When he found that he was not to be relieved of the burden of his life, he had declined mak-

ing any change in the document he had executed. Therefore there was nothing for me to do but close up matters with Miss Nannie's husband and get back to Boston with the title deeds for the syndicate. That was really all I need concern myself about. I had also learned that Frazer's father, having only a life interest in the Frazer farm, could not legally have transferred it to his overseer for a gambling debt. Walter Frazer could recover that property. I so represented it to him before leaving Virginia. He was sitting up, all bandaged and pallid, but looking resolute. He had got up before answering me, and cautiously closed the door between us and the shabby little parlor where Mrs. Frazer was most frequently to be found. "Modulate your voice, my dear fellow," he said, coming back to the great chintz-covered easy-chair that somebody had sent for his comfort, and dropping wearily back into its cavernous arms. "Do you suppose you are telling me anything I did not know before? Do you suppose Uncle John has left me in ignorance all this time? I positively forbade his ever discussing the subject with my mother, and it is on her account that I begged you to modulate your voice. It would make her restless and importunate, you see. It tires me just to think of the arguments she would bring to bear on the subject. Naturally she would think I could and ought to do better by her."

"So you can, so you ought, so you must," I spluttered impetuously, and immediately apologized to the look in his blazing eyes. "Oh! I know you've set me down as an impudent, pushing little Yankee a score of times already; but you see, my dear fellow, I've got interested in you personally since coming here, and

hang me if I don't want to see you make something better of your life, for your own sake, you know—entirely for your own sake."

He gripped the arms of his big chair with his long, blue-veined hands, and leaned forward with a face full of passion and gloom. "I've made an infernal mess of my life, or others have done it for me. What would more money mean but a broader margin for—misery? Why should I drag my father's memory from the grave and parade it in the courts of the land just to cover it with shame? Why should I hurl a lot of innocent girls from comfort and security to grovel in the dirt and mire of the world that I, man as I am, can't keep clear of? Who would be the gainer by their loss? Would it secure for me elegance and refinement and gracious womanhood in my home in place—of——Curse it! have done with your intermeddling and confine yourself to your legitimate errand." Then, with one of these quick revulsions from passion to penitence that constituted his peculiar fascination, he had lain his hot hand in mine in apology, and granted me large liberty to abuse him in return. "Call me anything you like," he said—"idiot, imbecile, visionary."

"Don Quixote," I had compromised on, and we parted good friends in that my last interview with him. As I had passed through the hall on my way out, I met Mandy walking very cautiously, her eyes and her hands immovable upon a brimming bowl of chicken soup, whose savory fumes rose tantalizingly towards her nostrils, through which she was absorbing them with long-drawn, audible sniffs. I knew by token of the bowl that Mandy was carefully convoying towards the

sick-room that the overseer's daughter was in the little kitchen in the rear engaged in her unsuspected ministry.

Mrs. Frazer I caught a glimpse of as I passed the shabby parlor—not in her usual somnolent condition, but so nervously alert and wide awake as to suggest the brewing of mischief of some sort, for, verily, that was about all Mrs. Frazer was capable of brewing. And that was all I had brought away from Virginia with me, barring certain delightful reminiscences of the Culpepper girls and the Culpepper home. I had meant promptly to advise with old Scipio about Frazer Holcombe. The old man was at least entitled to know that his own firm convictions touching his Marse Fraze had been verified. It made me feel depressed to think how long the honest old soul had been suffering from unjust suspicion and languishing in Vernon jail, when a few words from me could have cleared him.

It was no easy matter to procure a beast that morning. Every burden-bearing animal about the premises was under requisition, if not already en route for Vernon, before Brown and I had dispatched our late breakfast. He promptly consented to be left to his own devices, when it was discovered that the most liberal and reckless offers could only elicit one decrepit-looking mule, warranted to get me to Vernon on time in case I carried a stout stick and ornamented my heels with two huge Mexican spurs, which the owner of my steed threw in for lagniappe.

I knew I must be very late, from the deserted look of the cabins as I rode through the Montrose quarter lot. A few old hags and ragged children huddled about the doorways, the old women discussing the

situation over their pipes, the youngsters gaping with staring eyes in silence. It was a momentuous day when Scipio was brought to trial. He had always carried it somewhat loftily toward the quarter folks, and there were those among them who were willing to see him abased. With difficulty I cudgelled and spurred my mule forward on the road with such success that when Vernon was still a mile or two distant I found myself gaining on a broad-shouldered equestrian who was shuffling lazily along in the same direction. It was 'Bijah.

"Going to the trial, 'Bijah?" I asked, spurring my mule alongside his. "You're late, aren't you?"

"I'll git thar plenty of time," he said doggedly; "dey cyarn win' up widout me." He looked down at me distrustfully from his superior altitude.

"Why?"

"Kass I'se on de jury. I'se a juryman myse'f." I observed then that 'Bijah was gotten up very elaborately, and that his hat was poised precariously over a radiating mass of wool recently released from the bondage of twine and twist. "I'll be thar in time to have my say-so."

"But you ought to be there in time to hear the law and the evidence in the case."

"What all dat to me? I done made up my mind which way I gwine vote; nothin' else don' consarn me."

This was a novel view to take of his duty, but I doubted not that 'Bijah was acting according to his lights.

"Have you ever been on a jury before?" I asked.

"Oncet," 'Bijah answered with an air of reminiscent

pride. "It were when ol' Dave Rooney kilt his wife. The jedge he try mek we bring in a verdic' uv manslaughter in de fus' degree, but we wur'n' big 'nough fools to call killin' a woman manslaughter, so we all twelve 'gree unanimous on 'accidental deaf,' an' got de ol' man off. Some folks is rank ongrateful in this worl'. You think ol' Dave ever gin any one of us so much as a sweet tater for gittin' him off? No, sir, not the wroppin' uv a finger."

"'Bijah," I asked, leaning over and suddenly possessing myself of a knife that was stuck loosely in a leathern belt about his huge waist, "is this the knife you stuck Yankee with?"

It was a random shot, but it went straight home.

"Who tol' you 'bout dat?" he asked with chattering teeth.

"The same person that told me you set fire to the Montrose gin." I followed up my advantage quickly. "I know it all, you see, so you may as well make a clean breast of it."

Which he did under the impulse of his first superstitious alarm, but then, with a sudden revulsion from timid awe to savage rage, he made a lunge for the knife I had possessed myself of. Perhaps my predicament might have proven very serious if three more belated horsemen had not come crashing through the undergrowth just at that juncture, and appeared at a fork of the road in front of us. They halted and looked at us curiously. They were all men of 'Bijah's own color. For a second I repented me of my rash championship of Scipio's cause. Only for a second, [illegible]ver.

"[illegible]ys," I called, eager to enlist them on the side

of right and justice, "this man has just confessed to me that he, and not old Scipio, fired the Montrose gin. Help me to arrest him."

But the herculean juryman was already beyond my grasp. Wheeling his horse short in the road, he plunged his spurs savagely into its flanks, causing it fairly to bound over the heavy clods. He rose once in his stirrups to shout back at me defiantly:

"Yes, 't were me that fired the Montrose gin, an' nex' time it'll be the Montrose house—'member that!"

He was speedily out of sight. The men of his own color were willing enough that he should settle the difficulty in his own way. 'Bijah's ill will was something they did not care to incur in the cause of abstract justice. As for me, Scipio's freedom was more of an object to me than 'Bijah's conviction, seeing I did not propose to revolutionize the remarkable jury system of that period. So I, too, was content to see the last of the burly incendiary.

It was to the Prosecuting Attorney that I conveyed my important information primarily. His countenance changed slightly in the direction of relief.

"Not that it would have made a particle of difference in the outcome," he explained, "for there are twelve men on the jury absolutely unable to write their own names or to comprehend the nature of an oath, but ready to swear their own color out of trouble every time. If Scip hadn't been a darky he might have been in some danger."

I found Scipio himself troubled on one score alone. "You see, son," he said, grasping my hand vigorously in greeting and in gratitude, "it cuts to be locked up.

My w'ite folks sot a heap er sto' by old man Scip, an' ef ol' Miss is lookin' down dis way jus' now, she must think Scip done forgot her trainin' en fallin' from grace. But mebbe the angels doan' make mistakes like we all."

I said I hoped they did not.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DAY'S ADVENTURES.

It all came of leaving Brown to his own devices that first day. I might have expended weeks in physical endeavor and mental manœuvering to the same end, without producing any such colossal results.

"How did you kill the day?" I asked politely, as mud-bespattered and hungrier than a pack of wolves I climbed the terraces at Montrose in the dusk of that eventful day, to find Brown at the top, looking exasperatingly clean and comfortable. His face was radiant and (in spite of desperate efforts to the contrary) his voice was a trifle exultant as he answered, heartlessly, "My dear boy, I hope some of your sable constituents will get into hocklety and require your professional services every day of my delightful sojourn in this happy valley. I really regard you as a superfluity."

I looked scornfully at his illumined countenance: "Delightful sojourn, happy valley. Oh! you've done it, have you? Well, wait until I scrape some of the delightful slush of this happy valley from my clothes, and satisfy the wolf that is gnawing at my vitals, and I will offer myself as a safety-valve. It is plain you are nearly congested with accumulated information."

"Remarkable day, remarkable country, remarkable people," began Brown, later on, when we were sitting

over the fire in my room with a box of cigars on a table between us.

"Remarkable girl! I had no idea she could be so easily placated. You must have spun it fine," I said.

"On the contrary, I told her the exact truth. I think it was the novelty of my proceeding that brought about the happy finale."

"You have n't lost much time. What put it into your head to begin the attack so promptly? I did n't know you had any plans for the day."

"Plans—attack—my dear fellow, there never was a clearer case of accidental happiness in the world. After you disappeared from this festive scene, this morning, on your remarkable steed (really one finds the word 'remarkable' absolutely indispensable in describing the slightest event in this locality), I found myself to all intents and purposes abandoned by the world. The business manager, a remarkably taciturn man by the way, gave some orders to a remarkable looking colored person across several rods of back yard, and galloped off in the same direction you had taken. I never had quite so much space left at my disposal before. I concluded to spend the day exploring this remarkable mansion. There seemed really, you know, nothing else to do, seeing I was left without guide, counsellor or friend, a stranger in a strange land. The remarkable looking colored person in the small house out in the big yard had closed herself in—in her fortress as it were; I imagine she is your cook; so that sweet converse with the only human being in sight was denied me.

"*I found* a stack of guns in one corner of the hall.

Some remarkable specimens of antique fire-arms among them. I think, perhaps, some of the old original flint-locks may be found there. The sight of a modern shooting-iron fired me with the energetic determination not to spend my first day in this happy valley like a rat in a trap. I would reward your energy in behalf of the martyr Scipio (by the way, what a remarkably shrivelled specimen of humanity he is,) by a duck supper. I had your word for it that the waters in the vicinity of the syndicate lands abounded in all sorts of water-fowl. I am quite willing to add my testimony to yours. I selected the most promising looking engine of destruction from the collection in the corner, and helped myself to the ammunition I found placed so confidingly on the dining-room mantel-shelf, and sallied forth.

Without the remotest conception of where I wanted to go, you know, only so I brought up where there was water and ducks. It occurred to me that the people down here, in your quarter lot, might be better informed than I on the subject of where I should certainly find ponds and possibly game.

I found a lot of remarkably loquacious colored ladies, all of them, seemingly, with nothing on earth to do but knit remarkable looking socks and smoke strong smelling tobacco in evil looking pipes. They were profuse in their advice and directions for my guidance. Inadvertently, I remarked that I would pay one of the many superfluous looking boys who swarmed about the lot to act as my guide. It resulted in an embarrassment of riches. I finally got under headway again, with sixteen two-legged, and ten four-legged attendants. Almost every boy had

his own mongrel cur, which he assured me it was needless to go ducking without.

"How you gwine git yo' ducks arter you shoot 'em?" was the contemptuous inquiry, in response to a mild suggestion on my part that I really did not need all those dogs. My guides soon came to grief among themselves. Each one of the sixteen was for having me take a different route. Not being endowed with ubiquity, I clearly demonstrated the impossibility of gratifying each one of them and left them to settle it among themselves, which they immediately proceeded to do in the most belligerent manner. By the time the sixteen boys and ten mongrel curs had become inextricably entangled, a whirling mass of legs and arms and lopped ears and stumpy tails, I was far in advance of them, encouraged to increased speed by the gleam of water in front of me, through a fringe of stiff rushes that must outline a bank to something.

I bent my back to the approved angle and stole stealthily forward. A sight met my eyes, before which all your yarns about bringing home sixty and seventy ducks in a day, sank into commonplace probability. A round lake, surrounded by dense woods, was before me. Resting on its bosom, darkening it, solidifying it, so to speak; bridging it, if the creatures were accommodatingly inclined; was a solid mass of—ducks. I was in a mood to give contrite credence to the biggest yarn ever spun by hunter or explorer. Seeing was believing. I had but to raise my double-barrelled shot-gun, loaded heavily with duck shot, and fire, in order to carry home more ducks than you and I could possibly consume in a lifetime. I suited the action to the word. I let go both triggers recklessly—blindly.

Where was the use of taking aim when it was impossible to miss? There was a whirring of wings, like the rising of a mighty wind. The air above me was darkened, as the amazed and outraged occupants of that reedy lake soared loftily over my head and disappeared. Not all of them, however. The trophies of my skill were there before me. Some lying stark and still, some fluttering painfully on broken wings, others essaying one last struggle for escape

The sound of my double shot brought my guides pell mell to the banks of the marshy little lake. The ten dogs plunged into the water tumultuously to secure my feathered victims. The sixteen boys fastened their ivory eyeballs on me investigatingly.

"What yur gwine do wid 'em?" a timid voice asked.

"Do with them! Eat them, of course."

My reply had a remarkable effect on these children of nature. They rolled over each other on the brambly banks in convulsions of enjoyment. The dogs, mean time, were piling my trophies conscientiously up at my feet.

"Boss," said a small, compassionate voice, "dem is pull doughs. Yur cyan eat dem. Nothin' cyan eat dem. Leas'ways w'ite folks cyarn, pigs kin."

I turned away disgustedly. If I had remembered my ornithology better, I might have known that nothing but the coarse, useless poule d'eau would have been permitted to multiply and people the waters in such fashion. I regretted this useless slaughter and awful evidence of ignorance.

Notwithstanding the assertion that "nothin' couldn't eat pull doughs," I was relieved to see my ebony bodyguard appropriate them and drop off with their booty

in the direction of the quarters. Only one of them, the compassionate spokesman, remained by me when the last poule d'eau had been brought out by the exhausted and dripping curs.

"I gwine teach you what a duck is," he said, soothingly, and plunged through the mud and into the tough undergrowth ahead of us with amazing indifference to the fate of his own cuticle. Again the gleam of water and reedy banks inspired my ambitious hopes.

"Dar now! Shoot!" My guide said softly, and effaced himself by dropping suddenly among the bushes and brambles from which, in his dun colored tatters, he was barely distinguishable. A small family of five brilliant hued ducks were peacefully making their way towards a reedy little island in the centre of the pond. I fired! Only three ducks rose on startled pinions and sailed out of sight. Instantly, as if he had been shot out of a muzzle himself, a superb setter plunged into the water from the reedy island, and swam with determined strokes for my ducks, in direct disobedience to a very angry young man, who paddled out from what I then discovered to be a "blind," and followed in the dog's wake, sending a volley of objurgation in advance of his pirogue. I was divided between interest in the young man, whose face was inflamed with passion; the magnificent setter, who picked up the ducks with gingerly regard for their preservation, and the probable outcome.

Perhaps I had been trespassing on this man's private property and would be the final recipient of his wrath. With a conscious air of wrong-doing the intelligent animal swam slowly back to the side of the hunting

boat and held up his offerings. His master gave him a command in a voice of fury, and turning, he swam to the spot where I was standing, and laid the ducks carefully down at my feet. I was about to offer him the inadequate reward of a pat on the head, when his master roared at me, "Don't do that, sir."

"Maxwell," I said, as Brown stopped to light his cigar afresh.

"Yes, Maxwell; and if it wasn't for our prospective brother-in-lawship I should say he had the most in—remarkable temper any man was ever possessed of. I'll say it anyhow. I had to stand by while he punished that noble beast most unmercifully. 'To teach him,' he said, afterwards, 'how to distinguish between his master's shot and another fellow's.' I confess I'm not sufficiently up in dogology to understand that mode of inculcating discrimination. I should have preferred not witnessing the castigation; but as I had evidently spoiled his fun, felt called on to wait and apologize. It's well I did, all things considered.

"I hope I'm not trespassing," I said, when the arm that held the lash dropped from sheer exhaustion.

"Trespassing!" I thought he repeated the word with scornful derision.

"Yes," I said. "I am a stranger to these parts and don't know much about your laws. Your game laws, I should say."

"You *must* be a stranger, if you think we've got any laws at all here," he said bitterly; "this pond's as much yours as mine, and you're welcome to all you can make out of it; only Mingo's got to learn."

At mention of his name, Mingo, who had been crouching bruised and breathless at the water's edge,

rose stealthily and with drooping tail stole cautiously up the bank; not even when Maxwell ordered him back with a perfect yell of rage did he turn; he was in a clear state of open rebellion. Such insubordination seemed to stir his master to the highest pitch of frenzy. He lifted his gun from the bottom of the pirogue, where he had been sitting all this while, and raised it to fire. I don't know how he managed it, but I suppose it was all owing to his enraged excitement. The next second, the pirogue was lying upside down on the water and my future brother-in-law was spluttering and floundering in four feet of water. I really rejoiced at it for a second; considered it a remarkable instance of justice overtaking an unjust man. But when my tattered guide gulped out that the man was lame and couldn't get out of the water himself, I changed my views on the subject.

"Who is he?" I asked, while I was flinging off my coat and shoes, but got no answer as Tatters was already flying off on a landward expedition.

I lugged him out, drowned to all intents and purposes, and was having a tough job rolling him over and over on the sedgy bank, when no end of people appeared on the scene, summoned, it afterwards came out, by Tatters. Most of them were black folks. By the way, what a remarkable discrepancy in numbers between the two races here! Fully fifteen blacks to one white, I should say from casual observation. We soon had the soaked hero of the occasion rolled up in the blankets some of the black fellows had brought along, and everybody looked comfortable and relieved when a good, round, healthy cuss word came from the *woolly heap*, bearing witness to the fact that our hero

was himself again. They were about to move off with him in procession when two ladies came rustling through the bushes, loaded down with bottles and things. I could see "paregoric" on one of the labels and "ipecacuanha" on another; dear creatures, they'd never had the benefit of lectures on "first aid to the injured."

It was the elder woman who carried the bottles and did the lamenting. Remarkably wordy woman Mrs. Maxwell! I'm afraid when—ah! well, I didn't deserve to have all roses in the future. I recognized both ladies immediately. They did not recognize me at all. Small wonder. The only time they'd ever seen me before was as a sprucely uniformed commander of a Federal transport. Deucedly becoming uniform it was, too! While now I strode before them hatless, shoeless, coatless, dripping with muddy water, hands grimy with toiling over that damp hulk of Maxwell's, and I am quite sure the loving gaze I fastened upon my Mary's sweet face must have lost some of its effectiveness from the streaks of dingy perspiration that were meandering down my cheeks. Everybody seemed to have forgotten me, the preserver, and I was rather glad it should be so. This was not the grand entrée I had planned. Mrs. Maxwell, failing in her frenzied efforts to persuade her son to take something out of everyone of the bottles see had brought, ordered the line of march, herself leading the way. Miss Maxwell came towards where I was trying to insert my waterlogged socks into my shoes. She began conventionally:

"How can we thank you sir, for——" I think at that juncture recognition was born. I searched my

coat-pocket frantically for my handkerchief. To think of not even having a clean hand to offer her after all those years. By the way, how did you settle matters for the martyr Scipio?"

"Hang the martyr Scipio! I want to know how you settled it with Miss Mary? You don't deserve to come off so easy."

Brown looked me coolly over from head to foot in a calmly investigating fashion: "Halsey, I am afraid atmospheric influences are hard to resist. Now, as I remember you, before you came to sojourn in this happy valley, you were distinguished for patience, discretion, discrimination and reasonableness. You asked me politely how I had managed to kill the day, and at some expense of time and rhetoric, I go into details for your instruction and entertainment, giving you the full story of my dramatic appearance upon the scene of action, only to have you querulously demand more at the end. I've told you all I have to tell."

"Ingrate!"

"Halsey," he added, after staring meditatively into the fire for several moments, "I'll agree with one of your remarks. I don't deserve to come off so easy. But Mary's a remarkable woman. Remarkable!

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARRIED ON A SAND-BAR.

AN ordinary, conventional marriage ceremony would have been a most unfitting finale to Brown's intermittent courtship of the trader's daughter. Anti-climax is inartistic, and Fate seemed artistically inclined in this matter. I am inclined to think that Fate generally did use Brown much better than he deserved. His countenance, however, did not indicate any marked sense of gratitude to Fate on the afternoon of the day which had been fixed for his marriage, when he rushed into my presence in a state of mental excitement bordering on lunacy. The tragic gloom of his handsome face was rendered somewhat ineffective by reason of the violent oscillations of one loose end to an extraordinarily high shirt collar that had not yet been brought in bondage. "The very devil is to pay," he said, laying an open slip of paper on the desk before which I was sitting, "and it all comes from the remarkable disorganization of this remarkable country." (Brown was given to generalizations which reflected on the country at large, whenever there was a hitch in any of his private arrangements.) He grappled the shirt-collar with both hands, glaring at me sidewise over its snowy peak, while he told his story in the tumultuous fashion which was characteristic of him in moments of great excitement.

"You see, it all comes of not having an established

local minister. These remarkable people are truly sheep without a shepherd. It really increases the difficulties of living immensely, and I should certainly think twice about the trouble I was likely to give my friends before rashly shuffling off this mortal coil. All these considerations were impressed upon me when I was an eye-witness of the tremendous exertions you under went in importing a minister for the funeral of the late Major Ransom. On that melancholy occasion I intimated to the officiating gentleman that I might shortly require his presence on a more cheerful mission, and took down his name and address. I really regarded it as quite a stroke of business, don't you see?—a judicious taking of time by the forelock."

"Quite," I assented, absently. I was digesting the contents of the paper before me, while Brown was rattling off his grievances.

"And when I went across the river to secure him for to-night, I regarded it as quite another stroke of business that I should kill two birds with one stone. No disrespect to the minister or to that in—license you have there."

I looked at Brown aghast. Evidently he had barely escaped anathematizing his own marriage license. "What's the matter with the license?" I asked; "it looks to me like a good legal document."

"Matter!" Brown sat down heavily. "Halsey, you *can* be exasperating when you exercise your talents in that line. Here we are in Mississippi! The bride's domicle, where the wedding feast has been spread, and the wedding guests have been bidden, is in Mississippi, and that license" (banging his fist down on the innocent document) "is made out for Louisiana. How is

that for a hitch? And here your nearest county clerk on this side of the river is fifteen miles off, and no time to get there and back, unless an aërial voyage could be undertaken."

"Perhaps the officiating clergyman won't notice it," I said, offering pusillanimous consolation.

"Not notice it! Halsey, you are beneath contempt. Do you suppose I got that license for the exclusive benefit of the Rev. Mark Hopkins, or for my own posterity?"

"Oh, I'm afraid I wasn't looking so far ahead," I answered in an humble and contrite spirit; "but you know, in the long run, it's not likely to come up."

"What an awful fool Mary will set me down for!" Brown said, running his fingers dejectedly around the inner edge of his collar and looking at me piteously.

"Not necessarily," I said, cheerfully. "I don't think common sense is ever exacted of men in your situation."

"Women have such an unreasonable horror of a postponed marriage, you know," he continued, despondently; "think it's a bad omen; will bring bad luck, and all that sort of thing. It really might induce hysterics on Miss Maxwell's part, you know." Brown's perturbation culminated in one of his usual attacks upon the social and religious regulations of Crooked Creek. I thought I saw a way out of his perplexities for him, but concluded first to read him a long-delayed lecture. "Brown," I said, very sternly, "hold up. You've said all I'm going to let you say in that direction. Stop measuring every man's corn in your own bushel measure. You've come down here, like the rest of us, fresh from the crowded centers of

civilization, purblind, soaked in ignorance, saturated with prejudice, and promptly set yourself up in judgment on a people you know less about than you do about the Hottentots or Hindus, particularly if your women folk happen to be interested in foreign missions. Did you expect to find all the municipal regulations of a big city ready to your hand down here? Did you expect to find public libraries in the cotton-fields, or run against philosophers in every corn-patch? Did you expect to find clerks and notaries, art leagues and Sunday-schools, and all other things that grow naturally out of the necessities of congregated humanity, where there's about one educated man to every three square miles? Did you expect to find softly upholstered church buildings and comfortably salaried shepherds among flocks that have been scattered by the storm whose most distant mutterings you and I barely caught? Because there are no scars, no gaping wounds, no waste places where you and I came from to remind us of the storm of shot and shell that rained down on these people, did you expect to find them as sleek and complacent as a nation of army contractors? I tell you that until I am ready to show that I could have gone through the ordeal these people have gone through without blanching; until I can prove that I could have brought at least an equal amount of patient endurance to bear upon the dreary task of making bricks without straw, I feel like standing with uncovered head in the presence of the men and women who, denied the mercy of bullet or sword, have had laid on them the bitter burden of sitting, like Cinderella, among the ashes, while her more favored sisters revel in the light and luxury of the fortunate.

I've been over all the ground you're treading on now, Brown, and if you were about to be married to a city belle, who couldn't possibly enter into the solemn compact without a striped awning and a soft carpet spread from curb to church door, I shouldn't dare propose a way out of the trouble you've made for yourself by bungling over that license. But you've had the good fortune to secure for a wife a woman who has seen so much of the really stern side of life that conventional regulations and society shams count for nothing with her. She simply never thinks of them. Miss Maxwell is as brave as she is charming. Cross the river and get married on the sand-bar over on the Louisiana side. You'll be able to boast of an original sort of wedding, at least."

"Married on a sand-bar!" Brown looked at me stupidly. He could not grasp such an entirely unconventional suggestion at once. "Do you suppose Miss Maxwell would consent?"

"Consent! My word for it, she will think it a 'perfectly lovely idea.' Try her."

Brown looked at me with reviving spirits, wrung my hand, and said pleadingly:

"I suppose it would not do for me to go there to-day. Would you undertake this last kind office, old fellow? You'll about have time before dark. Don't let her think me a greater ass than I am, you know."

"Impossible," I answered, equivocally.

So it devolved on me to inform Miss Maxwell that unless she preferred a postponement, she would have to forego the luxury of a bridal train and veil, and don a garb more suitable to the sandy waste from which

she and Brown must embark upon their matrimonial venture. My information threw Mrs. Maxwell into a state of excitement only a degree less than Brown's. Mr. Bud Maxwell simply said, "The deuce," with his usual brevity and emphasis. Miss Maxwell sustained my previous opinion of her nobly.

"I shouldn't care a rush," she said, after a full discussion, "if it wasn't for Miss Matilda. You know she has been so lovely to me since she let me tell her the whole truth, and I believe she does like to have me with her now. She insisted upon our being married in the chapel, and Sam says she's been there all day with a lot of her people having it decorated. Think of it!" (her great gray eyes brimmed over with tears)—"Miss Matilda dressing the Holcombe chapel for my wedding! Do you know, I believe she is so much happier since she knows the truth. I wish she did not have to be disappointed. What can we do?"

No one could see anything to be done, but for me, on my way back to Montrose, to stop and tell Miss Matilda of the change of programme, and to Bud I delegated the duty of conveying the bride-elect to the spot on the sand-bar where the other high contracting party would be found waiting.

I almost hoped that Sam had been romancing in his reports about the dressing of the chapel, but he had not. It was there, and not in the lonely little house behind the altheas, that I found Miss Ransom surrounded by a score of cheerful, bustling coadjutors. The little chapel had undergone a wonderful transformation. All its ghostly memories and musty odors must have escaped through the wide-open windows. The pallid baptismal font was gay with glossy ever-

greens and big bunches of red berries. The carved chancel-rail had disappeared under deftly woven garlands of graceful gray moss caught up with big bows of blue ribbon. Miss Matilda was superintending the hanging of the wedding-bell when I stood beside her.

It was the first time I had ever seen her in white. In the soft evening light she looked like a beneficent spirit come to scatter the gloom and desolation that had so long brooded over the spot. She smiled at me over an armful of evergreens, and then, reading my thoughts with that quickness of perception that characterized her, she said slowly:

"I promised Mary to put off black on the day she was married. It is queer how I allow her to have her own way with me, but I feel, you know, as if it was some sort of compensation for having misjudged her so cruelly all these years. Do you see my clumsy efforts at bringing together the blue and gray?" she added more lightly, directing my attention to the pretty adornment of the chancel-rail. "What shall I do with my pretty wedding-bell?" she asked, when I told her of the changed programme.

"Leave it," I said, daringly; "who knows but it may be needed yet before its brightness has quite faded? Sometimes this sort of thing becomes infectious, you know."

I was thinking of Frazer Holcombe. I was thinking of Scipio's declaration that he was going to tell him all about Miss Matilda. Could he hear of her trials and stay away from her?

"I shall leave it for to-night," she said, quietly, entirely ignoring my flippant suggestion, "because it is

less troublesome than to remove it. Give Mary my love, and tell her——"

"Oh! but you know she expects you to go with her. She says it makes her nervous to be in a skiff with Bud. I think myself, as a rule, he is better out of the way than in it. Mrs. Maxwell is entirely unavailable. She's an awful coward on the water, and, moreover, the wedding feast is still to be eaten under a roof, so she must stay at home. You are not afraid——"

"No, I am not afraid. I will go with her if she wants me. She could not ask anything of me in vain, I believe."

Truly, the barriers were broken down when the solitary survivor of the Ransoms could send this gentle greeting to the trader's daughter.

The Reverend Mr. Hopkins looking seriously bewildered, Brown fidgety but immaculate in point of costume, and I, were at the indicated spot on the sandbar a while before the appointed hour. As master of ceremonies I had plenty to occupy myself with. One of the big Smyrna rugs from the Montrose parlor was spread out over the ridgy sands of the bar, and at each of its four corners a motionless torchbearer, imported from the quarters for the occasion, and drilled by me into a state of passivity, stood like an ebony statue, holding a flaming hymeneal torch manufactured from pitch pine. Overhead the blue-black canopy of heaven, studded with stars of gold, made a royal wedding-bell. The only sound that broke the solemn stillness of our waiting time was the soft lapping of the water as it kissed the glistening sands of the bar. Brown made the circuit of the Smyrna rug many times on

restless feet. Beyond the radius of the torchlight all was chaos. From out chaos there came to our strained ears finally the faint far-away dip of oars. It might be the coming bride, or it might be a chance wayfarer across the watery highway that stretched invisibly about us on every side. Our torches were to be the bride's beacon-light, and I turned to see if my torch-bearers were true to their drill. They were absolutely rigid. Brown came to a halt immediately under one of them. His handsome face was pallid with the anxiety of the moment. I went and stood by his side.

"Suppose something should happen to her," he said, huskily—"the river so wide, the boat so frail, the night so dark. My wonderful, brave darling! What am I, that she should come to me this way?"

The rhythmic dipping of the oars came to us clearer and louder and nearer. The pointed bow of a gayly painted boat emerged from the gloom. The light of the torches fell on the dripping oars; on the brawny bronze arms of the rowers, in brave bridal array; on two white-robed stately forms, two seraphic faces, two dainty women sitting side by side in the broad stern, with soft, white clouds billowing about their heads. A slight tremor ran through my own prosaic frame. I looked at Brown; he made no stir of a single muscle. The rowers lifted their glistening oars from the rowlocks and let the little craft glide noiselessly towards us. So white, so still, so pure, it was as if they were coming towards us, those two sweet women, from out the land of spirits, to chide us gross mortals for the fretting and the fuming in which our little span was consumed.

The boat grated softly on the sands. A ripple of

girlish laughter broke the spell. Brown heaved a sigh of relief, and, rushing forward like a man just aroused from a trance, he soon had Miss Maxwell in position on the rug, where, with due regard for his own rheumatic anatomy, the Rev. Mark Hopkins proceeded to bind the knot with neatness and dispatch.

The familiar sound of paddle-wheels broke in upon the pastor's solemn voice, that sounded queerly enough in that vast wall-less temple. Our torches were misleading. The steamer slowed her wheels and turned her electric headlight full upon the little group clustered on the rug. Nothing was too unconventional not to be received calmly in that region. The soft strains of a wedding march, played by the steamer's band, floated to us across the water. Nearer and nearer the great craft crept, cautiously steering her way clear of the sands. Merry wondering glances from the passengers strewn along her landward guard rested on our brave bride, our ebony torchbearers, and us, the minor appointments. A shower of rice was hurled at us by some mechanical device, and then the steamer went her way, with a mighty churning of the waters, and we went on ours more quietly, only in different order. Brown sat by his bride on the crimson-covered seat of the Maxwell skiff, while Miss Ransom and I rowed back in the Montrose skiff. Scarcely a word passed between us. She was thinking—of, I know not what. I was thinking that if there were no Frazer Holcombe in the world, how sweet it would be to shelter this storm-tossed woman for the rest of her life.

"Perfectly deliciously romantic," my youngest sister called it, when I wrote her a full description of this

wedding, and she rashly declared that should the misfortune of being engaged ever overtake her, she should make it a condition that she might be married on a sand-bar, by the light of pine torches, under a wedding-canopy of star-studded skies.

My youngest sister is hopelessly romantic.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STOLEN BLESSING.

I HAD scarcely anticipated any fresh complications in the matter of Mr. Frazer Holcombe's affairs, and had come back to Montrose minded to attend to my own business, exclusive of all emotional distractions, prepared to forward that excessively obstinate person's renunciation of Mrs. Holcombe's bequest to Mrs. Telfair Forbes in Cuba, accept the title-deed to Montrose in her name, and get back to Boston without any more ado over the local snarls in which I had become unintentionally entangled. Nevertheless, a fresh complication did arise in shape of a somewhat melodramatic letter from the overseer Dangerfield's handsome daughter, Miss Fanny—just such a letter as might have been looked for from a tender, ardent girl, whose associations had all been thoroughly commonplace and whose vivid fancy had been nourished on questionable fiction. The letter was lavish of underscoring and bristled with exclamation points.

She "knew all!" she informed me with tragic energy in the first line. She was not going to defend Mrs. Frazer for listening when her son and I had been talking that last day of my visit. She was not going to abuse her either, because she was Mr. Walter Frazer's mother, and she did "feel *so sorry* for him." She *must* know if Mrs. Frazer was telling the truth in saying that the other Mr. Frazer, Mr. Walter Frazer's father, *could not* sell the farm to her father because he had

only a life interest in it. Mrs. Frazer said that if there had been any Frazers left in the country, it never would have been permitted. And Mrs. Frazer said it was for a gambling debt at that. It almost choked her to think how they all had been swindling poor Mr. Walter Frazer all these years, if Mrs. Frazer was telling the truth. She could never draw a comfortable breath at home until things were adjusted on an honest basis. She had not spoken to her father yet. She did not mean to until she had the entire story from a more reliable person that Mrs. Frazer. But I might as well tell her the truth, for if I did not, she would go to some other lawyer about it, or to Mr. Culpepper, or somebody else. She did not fancy going to Mr. Culpepper much, for those Culpepper girls had always scorned them (the Dangerfield girls), because they did not belong to any of the old families. But it did not make any difference whether she had a grandfather or not, she knew what common decency meant, and she meant to see justice done. Of course it would create an awful stir, but she knew she could manage her father. He and her mother and the children could get along on the little place his own father left them, and she could make a living somewhere. She reminded me of my surprised admiration of her cookery, and suggested that she could get a place as "help," if she could not do anything else. The letter closed with a frantic appeal for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

She got it by return mail—carefully and kindly worded as possible, but unpalatable, as it must of stern necessity be.

Scipio stood before me just as I was directing this

reply to Miss Dangerfield's hysterical letter. Brown was over at the Maxwells'. He seemed to find it pleasanter there than at Montrose. Scipio had come up after work hours, evidently surcharged with emotion of some sort. He seated himself on the wood-pile by my fireplace and began without any preamble, but with a quaver in his voice. "We's 'bleeged to do it, son. Me en Anarky cyarn see no yother way out'n our troubles. We gwine to Marse Fraze. We knows him an' he knows us. He's the onlies' one of our w'te folks we kin git to. Me en' Anarky ain' study 'bout nothin' else sence you got me out'n jail en' tol' me 'bout Marse Fraze. He won' never turn ag'in de ol' folks like some others done done. No, sir, our w'ite folks was true t' de backbones. You say Marse Fraze is po'. Den me en Anarky will work for him. De ol' man ain' plum gin out yet. We'se bleege t' go son, we cyarn stay yhere no longer. The folks is got a han'le ag'inst the ol' man, an' they ain't slow t' use it. I cyarn hol' up my head in meetin' no mo'. I done ben in de lock-up. Scip's record is ben a mouty clean one, son. I never were 'cused uv rascality befo'. An' it hu'ts, yes, sir, it hu'ts t' de ve'y core. Why, I cyarn 'buke de younges' brat down yon' at de quarter lot widout he up an' sass me fur a gin-burner! An' Bijah's folks is all down on me, kase dey say I done run him plum' out'n de country; en ef I gits up in pra'r meetin' to 'xhort, you kin yhear er snicker er a w'isper somewhar 'bout, tell you'd think dey wuz all ben wash as w'ite as wool, en Scip were de onlies' black sheep in de flock. I cyarn stan' it no longer, son. Me en Anarky is made up our min's to go to Marse Fraze, en live en die wid de las' uv our w'ite

folks. He won' never turn ag'in de ol' folks—we'se sho' uv dat much in dis worl'. It'll be lak t'arin' soul from body fur me en Anarky t' leave our cabin down on de crick, but mebbe our betters will full it soon. I done sol' de mule en de cyart, en all my pigs (ol' blue is got a fine litter, I tell you). En Anarky done trade off her chickens en her bar'l of sof' soap, en we is ready t' start. We gwine t' start yearly in de mawnin', an' Anarky she comin' up t' say good-by, too, presen'ly. Thar ain' nobody but you t' say good-by to. You is treat us mos' lak you ben one uv our ve'y own w'ite folks. De folks in de quarters is got a holt ag'inst de ol' man, son. Nobody ain' never had nuthin' t' throw up ag'in Scip befo'. Marse Frazer won't never throw it up to de' ol' man dat he ben behin' de bars. De folks would worry us inter our graves, son, ef we wuz to try to stick it out. 'Sides, we's ben res'less ever sence we know 'zackly whar Marse Frazer were t' be found. Ef he's po' he needs us, an' we needs him. I gwine tell him 'bout Miss 'Tildy, too. Miss 'Tildy 's lookin' mouty peeked. De ol' Major 's failin', son, failin' fast. Don' let dem triflin' quarter chaps freeze you out arter de ol' man's gone."

Scipio's last thought was for my comfort. It is astonishing how lonely I felt when the old fellow finally took his departure, after holding my hand in a painful grip while he reiterated his assurance that I had been almost like his very own white folks to him. I knew he had not swerved in his determination to depart the next morning, when a strange fire-builder invaded my room with the first gray streak of dawn, stumbling awkwardly about the unfamiliar premises. Somewhat unaccountably to myself, my first waking thoughts

carried me down Bristow's lane, to the house behind the altheas. I had neither seen nor heard anything about the Ransoms since my return from Virginia. This might easily have been, even had I been their accredited friend and associate, which I most assuredly was not. I had caught a glimpse of the old man's pallid patrician face, out at Vernon, on the day of Scipio's trial, but only across the courtroom. Since then I had been closely confined to the house, writing letters calculated to bring my sojourn on Crooked Creek to a speedy close, or else weather-bound, and thankful enough to have Brown with me to help me knock the billiard-balls about over the moth-eaten baize of the green table at Montrose. I asked the business manager that morning if he had heard anything of the Ransoms lately, and was answered with characteristic indifference, that he had heard that the old man was down with pleurisy, or something of that sort, but had not had any time to find out whether it was true or not. He supposed Miss Tilly would know what to do if he was. Leastways, he wasn't going where he wasn't wanted.

I considered it highly probable that I was doing that very thing when, a while after breakfast, I found myself lifting the wooden latch to the picket-gate before the Ransoms' door. Outwardly things looked inexpressively dreary. The trees and shrubs that graciously shielded the poor little cabin from observation in the time of their own affluence, now stood stripped and bare and impotent. The Major's white horse was trampling the soft, oozy ground of the yard into a dismal loblolly of mud and dead leaves, his sides coated with earthy incrustations, telling of many sies-

tas since the currycomb had fretted his aged flanks. The curtains were drawn down on the inside of the windows, and the house looked tenantless. I was hesitating as to whether I should knock for admittance or steal away, when Miss Ransom came through the front door and walked swiftly towards a swinging shelf stretched across one end of the gallery. It was full of bowls and pitchers that suggested messes for the sick-room which must be kept in cold places. She looked worn and white. The loose sleeves of her wrapper fell back as she raised her arms to the high shelf, showing her thin round wrists. Her hair was pushed carelessly back behind her ears, as if she had no time for personal consideration or adornment. She did not see me until she turned from the shelf, and then I was quite near her. She started nervously, but I thought her wan smile held some slight welcome.

"Yes," she said, in answer to my inquiry, "he is very ill—so ill it is not rational to hope. It is pneumonia."

"And there is no one with you?"

"We are so far from everybody. No one knows, except the doctor, and he is so busy he has only been coming every other day. He is eight miles from us. I sent Eben at daybreak to tell him of the change, but he is not here yet."

"I am going to stay," I said, resolutely, entering the hall by her side. "I shall stay here, unless you positively forbid me. You may want me. You will let me stay, will you not?"

She put her hand in mine, and fixed her great soft eyes gratefully on my face. "I am glad you are here," she said with quivering lips. "I think he—I may, need someone before the doctor comes."

She turned from me and went swiftly into the sick man's room, only to return again almost immediately.

"He has heard your voice and imagines that Will is here. If you will humor the fancy, you may give him a fleeting sense of happiness. It will not be hard to keep up the delusion—nor for long. I should like to see that tortured look pass away from his dear face before death comes to fasten it there indelibly."

I only lingered behind her long enough to tear a page from my memorandum book and pencil a line to Brown:

"Bring Miss Maxwell to Major Ransom's house. Miss Ransom needs her."

There were plenty of willing feet to be found close at hand, in the little kitchen, where half the force of the place was huddled in that lugubrious enjoyment of the mournful drama being enacted in that white-curtained room, which is characteristic of their race. Having selected my messenger, I walked boldly into the sick man's presence, conscious that it was a dangerous experiment I was trying, but feeling authorized in my assumption. Two trembling, withered hands were stretched out to me eagerly as I crossed the threshold, and the old man uttered the one word "Will" in a tenderer tone than I believed he could have attuned his voice to. I sank uneasily into a chair close by his side and yielded my hands to his trembling clasp. I was afraid to speak, for fear Reason might resume her throne and accuse me of impious insolence. I did not fear detection by those fast glazing eyes. I did not need to speak. His content was complete.

"*It's* all right now, Will," he crooned softly, "I

said if they would give you back to me I would forgive them all the rest. It's all right; I didn't mind the rest, home, nor fortune, nor anything, but I couldn't clasp hands with the men that had shed your blood, my boy—couldn't, you know. I've got you once more, Will; we'll never be separated again."

Like Jacob of old, I stole the blind man's blessing. With the caressing tenderness of a woman, he passed his trembling hand softly, lingeringly, lovingly, over my forehead, over my temples, down my cheeks, gently patting them as he crooned, over and over in a weaker voice, "It's all right now, Will, I couldn't say it before. It would have been such an awful lie. God bless you, Will, for coming back to me."

On the other side, kneeling with her thin white hands clasped on the bed, with her patient eyes fixed steadfastly upon the old man's pinched face, was the daughter whose lifelong ministry went for naught in that supreme moment of the Major's ecstasy. There was no look of resentment on her sweet face. She was forgotten, absolutely forgotten by him. She recognized the fact and accepted it as she had accepted so much that had gone before this supreme moment. I resented it for her.

"Matilda is here too," I said, close into his dulled ears—"she who has been so much more to you than anybody else; she who is entitled to your first best blessing."

"Matilda is a good girl—yes, a good girl. She will be glad to hear me say all the pain and bitterness is gone. She's begged me to say it before. But I couldn't, son. It would have been such an awful lie, Matilda!"

She unclasped her hands and laid it in the one that was groping blindly over the covering to find it. "Yes, father."

"Matilda, I forgive all the world. You may tell them so after Will and I have gone away together."

"Yes, father."

She dropped her head heavily. He sighed wearily —once, twice, three times—then he and Will were together once more. It was very quiet and very peaceful. All the hardness, all the bitterness was gone out of his face. As he lay in death his features were stamped with a calm dignity I had never seen before. His daughter, too long inured to active leadership to remain inactive now, came around to where I stood gazing with a sort of surprised fascination at the still face on the pillows, and said quietly:

"He looks as he used to look before the—before anything happened. I am so glad it all ended just as it did; glad that you came just when you did. You can understand things better now. You can see how the iron had entered his soul so deeply, that nothing less strong than the hand of death could draw it out."

Yes, I could understand it better then, and I could understand how it was that, because a few wrecked lives, only a few, are being dragged out to a bitter end; because a few maimed and wounded souls are beating about like rudderless ships, whose torn and tattered sails refuse to waft them into strange harbors, be they never so still and safe; it becomes possible that the unthinking and the unfeeling should try to fan the embers of sectional differences into flames.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CHRISTMAS VISIT.

ON Christmas morning I found myself wandering aimlessly from one room to the other at Montrose, with no particular object in view but to get through the day as best I might. I was in solitary possession of all the vastness and the faded splendors of that monumental spot. Cooper, the business manager, had betaken his sluggish soul and acidulous features to the kindlier warmth of some distant kinsfolks' hearthstone. Brown and his bride had gone to consume their mince-pie and roast turkey, under Brown's maternal roof-tree. The invitation to dine with Mr. Bud Maxwell and his voluble mother was not tempting enough to carry me over six miles of frozen mud. There was no one else to think of me even except, perhaps, Miss Ransom, and she was holding her lonely vigil in the house behind the altheas, doubtless repeopling the earth with those who had gone before, living over in their company the Christmases of yore.

I had spent my Christmas eve in a study of plantation sports down among the cabins. I had found that tatters and empty pockets are not necessarily foes to fun and jollity. More than once I had been assured, plaintively, that "times wasn't what they used to was," a lucid admission that the emancipation proclamation had not proven an open sesame to an earthly paradise.

A very slight insight into plantation sports had sufficed to satisfy my curiosity. There was nothing to tempt me across the threshold to-day. I was in a frame of mind to deal out harsh judgment upon Miss Nannie's husband, through whose unexplained delay in answering my letter I had been compelled to postpone my home-going. I wondered if the box of holly and mistletoe which I had gathered out of the Montrose woods with my own hands was then adorning the rooms where mother and the girls were keeping the day without me. This sent me to the window where I could look out on the bare, frozen terraces, and beyond them to where a certain tree, aflame with crimson berries, made a spot of bright color in the wintry landscape. It was not an inspiring landscape. The fields, from whence the cotton had all been picked, spread in broad, brown acres all around me. Blue smoke-wreaths crept from the low brick chimneys of the cabins only to float in dingy disintegrated patches out on the heavy atmosphere. The China trees, held fast by their ragged clumps of yellow balls, tempting to the crime of drunkenness some robin-redbreasts that hopped lazily from limb to limb. Through the black, wet trunks of the trees I could see the green gate at the front of the slope that opened from the public road into the Montrose grounds. While I stood there it swung to admit two mules. On one of them sat a woman well bundled up to protect her from the cold. She did not wait for her companion, who found some difficulty in closing the heavy gate from his position in the saddle, and dismounted to secure it.

These two moving figures were not handsome in

themselves, but they gave me something to look at as their mud-bespattered beasts slowly climbed the slope that led from the green gate to the terraces. Visitors to the quarters from some of the neighboring plantations, I concluded at once, and wondered why the man should not have selected the more direct route, which led around the terraces; plainly he was conducting his companion immediately towards the yard premises of Montrose. There was a carriage-block at the foot of the last terrace, and when the mules reached it, curiosity was slightly stimulated by seeing the man respectfully back the woman's animal up to this block and assist her to alight, and still further by seeing her take a pocketbook from some fold of her apparel, pay him some money, and dismiss him. "A visitor to our cook," I said, revising my former opinion, and turned back towards the fire, not caring to be discovered on the lookout, at her nearer approach. I heard some one run lightly up the front steps a moment later, then a woman's face peered in at the long window, but was withdrawn quickly. A short, imperative knock on the door of the library, where I was sitting, followed. Before I could possibly have reached it, it opened from the outside, and a voice that I did not at first recognize said imperatively:

"I must come in. Can't stand on ceremony. I am frozen to death. Rode all the way from the river on a mule that couldn't go faster than a snail if you prodded him with a red-hot poker."

My visitor had been sloughing her various envelopes all this time, and finally stooping, she frankly drew from over her boots an immense pair of blue yarn stockings of great length. "If it hadn't been for

these, my feet would have frozen stiff to the stirrups." Her veil was the last thing she laid aside, but it had not taken me all this time to recognize Fanny Dangerfield. I thought her face looked older, graver, and vastly more serious even in that first surprised glance of recognition.

"Of course, you are surprised to see me," she said, coming forward easily and accepting the best chair by the fireside as her due, "but I had to come. There was no other way of straightening things out. I came to see Miss Matilda Ransom, and you must take me to her as soon as I have thawed out a little. I would have gone to her in the first place if I had known how to get to her. Besides, I wanted some advice from you. Is she—Miss Ransom, I mean—awfully grand and inaccessible? Will she freeze me, do you suppose?"

"She is perfectly lovely," I said, impulsively, then blushed at my ready enthusiasm.

Miss Dangerfield fixed her handsome eyes calmly on my perturbed features: "She must be to win so many hearts, and—to keep them for ever. There have been great changes at home," she said, suddenly withdrawing her eyes to fix them on the flames in front of her. "Has no one written to you—about it?"

"No one at all."

"Then you don't know about father, and the farm, and—me?"

"Not a word."

"I'd rather somebody else had the telling of that part," she said, twining the fingers of both hands nervously about each other, "but it can't be helped now, and as I want some advice from you, I may as well

begin way back at your letter. You wrote me word that it was true, didn't you, that Mr. Frazer's father could not sell the place to father; that is, legally, I mean?"

"Yes. I explained why, too, I believe."

She nodded, pressed her lips firmly together as if summoning up resolution, and resumed hurriedly: "Yes, you made it very plain, very plain. I showed that letter to father."

"What did he say?" I asked eagerly. "It was a daring thing to do." She shivered, drew a little closer to the fire, and spread her hands out before it. They were trembling.

"He cursed you! cursed the Frazers! cursed me!" She dropped her face into her outstretched hands.

"I am sorry you showed it to him—sorry for your sake."

"Sorry!" She looked at me contemptuously. "Did you suppose, after that woman had listened at the keyhole and found out we were all living in a stolen house, I was going to stop until things were righted? It was awful, though—awful. He did not believe I was in earnest at first. I thought he would kill me when I convinced him that I was. I told him if he would voluntarily relinquish the farm to the rightful owner, no one but he and I need ever know about your letter; but if he did not, I would put it in the hands of a lawyer, and then mother and the children would have to know. It was weeks and weeks before I could convince him how horribly in earnest I was. Oh! it was awful. I felt sorry for him, sorry for myself, sorry for the man who had been cheated by us all these years. It would tire me to go over

it all again. Mr. Frazer and his mother are living at the farm now. Our folks are on the little place that belonged to mother. They won't suffer."

"They! How about yourself?"

"I am not going back any more, at least, perhaps not," she said quietly. "I am going to see Miss Matilda Ransom, and then I am going off somewhere to make a living. I'm old enough and strong enough."

I wanted to find out what shape Frazer Holcombe's gratitude to this girl who had restored him his property had taken. I believed I knew him too well to suppose him capable of that vice of small souls, ingratitude. I observed cautiously: "Mr. Frazer must feel very grateful to you."

"He does, very," she said, with a slight curl of her upper lip, but never once taking her eyes off the flames. "He offered to reward me handsomely."

"Offered to reward you?" I felt indignant.

"Oh! he didn't call it that, you know. He offered to marry me out of gratitude. I suppose he thought in that way I would not lose anything after all. Generous of him, wasn't it?"

"And you told him?"

"I told him to wait."

"To wait? Until when?"

"I only told him to wait. I told myself I would come down here and see the woman that he has been loving so faithfully all these years. I would tell her, as nobody else could tell her, how his heart still clung to her, but he dared not ask her to help him share the shame of such a mother. If I find her proud and harsh, or forgetful and indifferent, not willing to help him bear the burden he cannot lay down, then I will

go back and take him at his word. And I will try my best to be to him what she could be without trying. He needs somebody. But I shall tell him first, that although it hasn't been my lot to win hearts and hold them forever, I can distinguish between gratitude and affection. It won't be the same thing to him, and it won't be the same thing to me, but it will be better for him than to be in torment every time he is out of sight of that poor incapable. I would like to think I was necessary to some one creature on earth." She flung her hands over her head with a gesture of inexpressible weariness, and sighed. We were both silent, I because I did yot not know how to deal with such unconscious heroism; she because, doubtless, new ideas and vague plans were crowded chaotically on her tired brain. She spoke again presently: "One line from Miss Ransom will bring him flying. He loves her so dearly, dearly."

"And if she writes that line?"

She looked at me with brave, unflinching eyes, but her voice was a little unsteady as she answered:

"Then I shall have to trouble you for some letters of introduction to your people. I have a little money. Father was glad enough to help me off on a visit to his sister in New Orleans. But I want to go further away. I want to go to your country and find a place where, if a woman has anything to offer, she may offer it; if it is in her to do anything, she can do it. Some of these days it will be so here, but not yet awhile; we are too close to the days when labor meant servitude, for it to be tolerated in women. I want to work at something; I'm not quite clear what. What a pity girls should not all be trained to something. But I

can try, you know, and if you will give me a letter to some of your people, it may make it easier. If I go away at all, I want to go very, very far away. But first of all I must see this Miss Ransom, now—at once." She sprang restlessly to her feet. "I can't even think collectedly until I have talked to her. If she is a woman capable of appreciating unselfishness, faithfulness—a love so pure and exalted that rather than run the risk of possible defilement for its object, it would slay itself—then it will not take her long to recall Mr. Holcombe. I can make him happy that way. I could only make him comfortable the other way."

Her voice sank to a plaintive monotone. I left her and went off to ransack the premises for some means of conveying her comfortably into Miss Ransom's presence. I was nervously anxious to place her under that good woman's charge before the day should grow any older or any bleaker. That she was in a state of feverish excitement was plain to be seen from the crimson spots on her cheeks and the unnatural brilliancy of her eyes.

When we were fairly on our way down Bristow's lane she showed me an entirely new phase of her character. I was at a loss to decide whether she had repented of her free confidence or not. For some reason or other, she selected an absolutely impersonal line of entertainment during the ride. I never knew before what a brilliant talker she could be on occasion. The dancing shadows on the frosty ground, the boundless extent of the broad fields at Montrose, the kindly people she had met at the landing, the difficulties that overtook her when they came to a ditch where a bridge

had just been wrecked by a passing team—anything, everything—served to fill up the time occupied in traversing the short piece of lane between Montrose and the Ransom place.

She clung to my arm nervously, for a second only, as I helped her from the buggy, and opened the gate for her to enter.

"You will introduce me!"

"Yes. And before I leave you, you are to tell me how I can serve you later. I shall simply tell Miss Ransom you are traveling alone, and bespeak her hospitality for you."

That was all I did. Miss Ransom received her with a sweet, unquestioning graciousness of eye and manner. I went away and left them alone. The day was no longer empty or vapid. It was crowded uncomfortably full of nervous fancies and anxious speculations that were as time-consuming as so many active undertakings. Night fell upon the earth with a suddenness that reminded me of my hours of oblivious reverie. It was before breakfast the next morning that old Eben put a note in my hands from Miss Dangerfield. It was short, but it conveyed volumes. It was simply a request for the promised letters of introduction to my friends in Boston. Miss Ransom, she added, would kindly accompany her out to the river. It closed with this pathetic admission:

"She is all and more than you or any one else has ever claimed for her."

Between the lines of that girlish note I read the lines of fate.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STORY OF A DINNER.

IF these papers should terminate with the bald record of the fact that Frazer Holcombe and Miss Matilda Ransom actually were married in the little chapel in the woods before the garlands she had woven for Miss Maxwell and my friend Brown had withered, they would fall far short of their true mission.

It was at the close of a somewhat heated dinner-table argument not long since, sustained in my own home in Boston, that my wife (née Dangerfield), evidently fearing that I might be worsted in the wordy argument, said briskly: "Why don't you read them that last batch of letters from Crooked Creek?" My wife's suggestions are generally admirable, and I acted upon this one promptly.

The argument, sustained on the one hand by theorists who had never crossed that imaginary line which divides the South—sloth, ignorance, and swagger—from the North—thrift, enlightment, and zeal—was: That the South was socially and politically just where she was when Lee surrendered, with a few notable exceptions where Northern capital and energy had rescued it from the hands of the natives and planted it on a firm basis of progress and prosperity. My own intimate business and social relations with certain localities in the South, which were absolutely out of reach of any such adventitious aids to success, furnished me

conclusive arguments for the defence. I must confess, however, that I don't think I should ever have thought of that bundle of letters as a "clincher," if Fanny had not suggested it and promptly imported it from the desk in my library.

"Before I read these letters to you," I said, sorting them in the sequence of their proposed use, with the superior composure of a man who is conscious of holding a hand full of trumps, "I must make a few preparatory remarks. For about five years I was the legal representative of a syndicate that essayed to lift a certain portion of the South out of the Slough of Despond and plant it upon the firm ground of progress and prosperity. I don't claim any philanthropical intent for my employers. Things were in a snarl with those people. Their slaves were freed, their credit gone, no money, nothing to start on—it all made lands cheap, don't you see, and nothing would be easier than to get back their money (I'm reasoning for the syndicate), working these immense places with a lot of docile laborers, attached to the soil and with natural leanings towards the men who had fought to liberate them. Of course, it would be hard on the natives, but the old slave-owner must naturally stand in an antagonistic attitude towards his former bondsmen, which would engender a mutual distrust and suspicion, inimical to their commercial relations.

"You see, those fellows were theorists," I said, pressing the folds out of Brown's last letter; "there are some few such left yet. It would have been better from a monetary point of view, if my employers had invested in the planters themselves rather than in their plantations. They came to the conclusion, or, rather,

I should say, they purchased the conclusion at high figures, that the only men who can cope successfully with the free agricultural laborers of the South, are the men who have been born among the negroes, who have grown up with them, and are familiar with every quirk of their comical, childlike, irresponsible natures. In the first confusion subsequent to the din and destruction of battle, this was not so apparent, and because it was not apparent, a cloud of witnesses arose to defame, misrepresent, and darken the records of the men who had a bigger task set them than ever they set their own slaves. I'm glad that I saw these people, whom I am proud to call friends, at that dark time; glad that I saw the country in its darkest and most hopeless period. I made more out of that experiment of the syndicate's, than any man who put his capital into it ever did. They may have got back their money, but I got a true insight into the heroism of the lives those tired and heart-sore soldiers of the Confederacy took up as pilgrims take up a cross—and —I got my wife."

The wine-glasses were held aloft, as someone proposed "Mrs. Halsey!" and were drained with a will.

"The letters!" "The letters!" "The letters!" ran in an impatient ripple around the table.

I selected Brown to lead off with:

"You would hardly recognize Montrose," wrote that veracious chronicler, "under the new management, which, I may as well say at the outset, is Mrs. Frazer Holcombe. Her husband is adoringly acquiescent in every improvement she suggests, and truly their presence in the old mansion appears to have *acted like* a resurrection-trumpet on the fortunes of the

plantation. I think Providence must have purposely placed all those stumbling-blocks in the way of your securing that magnificent property for your syndicate. As it is, by giving up the Ransom place and the Virginia property—drawing in their lines, as it were—they are making a good thing of it at the homestead.

"The old inhabitants say it is almost like having the original Mrs. Holcombe back. The chapel is open every other Sunday, and the ground around it blossoms with roses and all the other things so responsive to feminine culture. Mary and Mrs. Holcombe have manufactured a choir out of the most unpromising material. Mrs. Holcombe is organist and Mary soprano. I think Mrs. Holcombe can draw more soul out of the instrument than any mortal living. Mary says it is because she put all her soul into it in those dark days when she had no other source of comfort on earth, and that it is soul answering to soul now. Perhaps she is right.

"The Montrose cabins have filled up with hands that have come flocking from all quarters of the State, hearing that one of the 'fambly' was at the head of things again. Mrs. Holcombe has established a schoolhouse, and if the old Montrose place don't turn out woolly-headed Senators and mahogany geniuses by wholesale, the fault won't lie at her door. She and Holcombe both hold that a mass of ignorance is more dangerous than anything conceivable in the body politic; so as long as the franchise has been bestowed upon several million helpless and benighted animals, it is their wise endeavor to direct them as faithfully as possible to a judicious use of their bewildering prerogative. I don't think Holcombe is very enthusiastic

in that direction, but he don't intend to check the wheels of progress on his estate. He is content to leave a good many social and political fallacies to the adjustment of time.

"Mrs. Frazer is the most thoroughly reconstructed creature on the premises. I think she stands very much in awe of her daughter-in-law. She has degenerated into a mild-mannered, quietly dressed elderly woman, whose most stimulating activity is the personal supervision of the fancy poultry for which Montrose is becoming famous. Holcombe is importing shorthorns, much to the delight of the neighborhood, as such benefits are diffusive.

"I think you will find him more changed than the place. He looks younger by ten years. Mary calls him 'awfully good looking.' To me his face suggests the serenity that comes after a fiercely fought contest. It is as if seven devils had been cast out of him."

After that sentence Brown's letter became rather too personal to be read aloud to our guests, so I folded it up and opened one from Mrs. Frazer Holcombe to Fanny. As it was from Brown's letter that we had gleaned the glad tidings of great joy at Montrose, so it was from Mrs. Holcombe's letter that we learned much of Brown's felicity:

". . . I am so glad Mr. Brown is the owner of my own dear old home, or, at least, the spot on which it used to stand. Their new house is nearly complete. It was a tender thought on Mary's part to get her husband to rebuild it on the old plan. The heap of ruins has disappeared. The two tall chimneys, which you, or at least Mr. Halsey, will remember, standing like monuments to desolation and to despair, mean some-

thing now. They flank the new roof-tree to what will be one of the happiest firesides in all the country around. Mary seems perfectly happy. She has lost that little defiant air she carried about with her when she felt she must be for ever on the defensive. Mr. Brown is one of our most valued and valuable citizens. Public-spirited himself, he had done a good deal towards dissipating that somewhat injurious inclination on the part of our hard-pressed people to make the grave political questions of the day a secondary consideration. At first, you know, it was somewhat like worrying a man lying at death's door about the cut of his next year's coat, to get our people to bestir themselves about politics.

"When the Browns move into their new home, I believe his mother will make her permanent home with them. One of Mary's tender thoughts for me, who, of all persons, deserves least at her hands, has been the clearing up and beautifying of the old garden where Will and father lie side by side. Another scar healed over.

"Mr. Brown and Mr. Holcombe do each other good. Each has need of the other in neighborly fashion. After all, is this not equally true of the sections they individually represent? I find my husband growing more hopeful and more matter-of-fact by contact with this practical man, who had had to do battle in crowded ranks all his life; while Mary declares that her husband has moderated many of his extreme views since becoming familiar, by experience, with the difficulties that beset the lives of the old planters. We do not spend much time in retrospection, however. The past

is ours to embalm, the present ours to improve, the future His alone who doeth all things well."

The glasses were raised once more as I read the closing sentence in Mrs. Holcombe's letter, and her health was proposed and drunk in reverent silence.

"Read Mrs. Maxwell's next," said Fanny, with a twinkle in her eye. "Matilda's has made them all feel solemn."

I really felt as if I owed it to my old friend, Mrs. Maxwell, to eliminate all the punctuation marks and read at railroad speed, in order to give full force to her characteristic communication. But even then Mrs. Maxwell's staccato voice would have been missing. It was a plea for aid, addressed to Mrs. Halsey, to whom she had become much attached during the short stay Fanny and I made on Crooked Creek when we took in the New Orleans Exposition on our bridal tour.

"My dear Mrs. Halsey," she said. "I hope you have not forgotten your offer to do anything for me in Boston that would be of assistance to me. I really do need help awfully; and it's help that I'm writing to you about. I believe you call all your servants 'help' up North; we call them hindrance down here. I hear you expect to go to New York soon. Could you possibly stop in at Castle Garden and send me a girl fresh from the salt-water? I don't care what nationality, Irish, German, Swede, Hottentot, just so she don't have to take music lessons twice a week, and won't burn up a whole week's roasting of coffee while she steps down to the quarters to try on he new 'bas.' We're so abominably reconstructed down here that I really don't know what is going to become of us. It wasn't so bad when Mamie was with me, because then,

if I got up in the morning and found there wasn't a blessed darky left in the yard, she could turn in and help to get as good a breakfast as anybody would want to eat. But, my goodness gracious me, things are topsy-turvy now, I tell you. There's Sam, you remember—Sam, that ape Mamie used to keep tagging after her—Sam's cutting wood at this blessed minute with a novel lying open on the wood-pile before him. Ten to one, if you could get close enough to see it, you'd find it upside down, but so is everything else in the country, so that don't matter. I'm upside down myself, more than half the time.

"It don't put a woman into a specially good humor to come down-stairs in the morning and find nothing but cold ashes in the kitchen stove; it makes her think hard things about the emancipation proclamation, you know; but Mr. Brown says we are in the fermentation process now (I quite agree with my son-in-law there), and that the next generation of darkies will be better balanced, and will appreciate an education for its own sake, and not merely because it's like white folks. I hope my son-in-law is right there, too, but as I don't belong to the next generation, I've either got to import help or be put in a lunatic asylum, and there's where I tell Bud he's helping to send me. What with Bud's new-fangled machinery, his buggy ploughs (it does look too ridiculous to see a darky perched up in a buggy, riding all over the place like he was taking an airing), his cotton planters, his this, that, and the other, the whole plantation is just turned topsy-turvy. I suppose some of these days we'll invent some mechanical contrivance by which we can sit in the parlor and turn a crank that

will pick the chickens, grind the coffee, cook the breakfast and bring it in. But that day isn't in sight yet, and I'm just outdone with operatic house-girls and yard-boys with intellectual cravings. Send me something green and fresh, and I'll make out with her if I have to learn the mute alphabet to make her understand what I'm saying.

"It never occurred to me that reconstruction would be such a painful process. It's worse than the neuralgia and toothache rolled into one. Mrs. Holcombe says I take too personal a view of the situation; but when a body is too tired at night to go to sleep, and is just chuckful of disgust and aches, they're apt to feel very personal. Mamie's and Miss Matilda's grandchildren will have a delightful country to live in. That's impersonal enough, isn't it?"

No one could accuse our guests of undue solemnity after listening to Mrs. Maxwell's comical wail, and she was not left out of the toasts. I pocketed the budget, and was about to return to my nuts and raisins when Mrs. Halsey said reproachfully, "You are not going to leave Scip out?" I demurred. Scip's letter was of interest only to us, and having been written by one of Anarky's grandchildren, who the old man told me proudly, was "a mouty peert hand at his books," was full of that dialect I had found it so difficult to comprehend when I first went South. But there was a universal demand for Scip's letter, after I had told them all who Scip was and what stanch friends he and I must always be. That is how Scip, who had the first say in this record of my Southern sojourn, came to have the last word also.

The old man had much to tell me about the im-

proved state of affairs on the place, describing the new gin with prolixity and inaccuracy; telling how the cabin on the creek had been made almost as good as new, and with what a sense of security he and Anarky now dwelt beneath its roof.

"But de days is rollin' by, son, an' me an' Anarky done said mo' than oncet, Lord, now let thy servants depart in peace. We've had mercies showed us mo' than we ever looked to see with these ol' eyes of our'n. When the frost strips the leaves from the trees, we can see from the cabin window acrost the fields to whar' the big house stands on the terraces, and see the smoke curling from every chimbly jus' lak ol' times, an' it comforts us, son. We says to ourselves, our own w'ite folks there—folks that will bear with us in health, care for us in sickness, and mo'n for us dead. We ain' much 'count now, son, me an' Anarky, but somehow Miss 'Tildy and Mars Fraze don't seem to be flingin' it up to us at all de time. It looks lak ol' times to see our Mars Fraze an' Miss 'Tildy ride by de cabin do' side by side on horseback. They don't ride so fas' nor the horses ain't so young and skittish, but it all looks mighty happy and peaceful, an' that's mo' than me an' Anarky ever hoped to see with the eye of flesh. They mos' genully stops, Miss 'Tildy and Mars Fraze does, when they's ridin' 'round the place lookin' after things, to look at Anarky's gyardin', or t' take a drink out of her go'de, an' somehow or other, the dahlias an' the hollyhocks seem t' hol' their heads up straighter for Miss 'Tildy's praise, an' the water tastes sweeter to us out'n the go'de our white folks is touched."

* * * * * *

"Yes," said my dear wife, with flashing eyes, "our Cinderella has arisen from the ashes and come forth to take her place among her sisters, with a diadem upon her brow; and the Prince Progress shall lead her beside still waters. He came to her shod with the sandals of good will and clad in the bright garments of hope, and she greeted his coming lovingly."

Some one ordered the glasses filled. They all stood while the last toast was drunk. It was to Cinderella and the Prince!

THE END.